NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 462 NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 4, 1905. Price, Five Cents

NICK CARTER AND THE MARIXBURG AFFAIR

OR FOILING A GREAT CONSPIRACY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

As the detective tore the mask from the woman's face, Count Lanski's dagger flashed in the air, but before he could use it, Chick sent him to the floor with a blow on the jaw.

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Nick Carter and the Marixburg Affair

OR,

FOILING A GREAT CONSPIRACY.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURE.

The International Detective Association having completed its organization, had adjourned, and Nick Carter, who had been elected president, found that he would have to wait three days before the departure for New York of the next French liner. He was no stranger in Paris, and there were many ways of occupying the time during the period at his disposal.

The day had been a busy one, and the association had celebrated its birth by a banquet at the Café Leclair. At midnight Nick took leave of his friends and, entering a cab, was driven to his hotel. On reaching the place, he did not at once proceed to his room. Dismissing the cabman, he strolled in the direction of the Seine to walk off the fullness induced by the hearty meal he had eaten. There was a cool breeze astir, and, after walking half a mile, he sat down on a bench in one of the many small parks which dot the city. With mind free from care he lit a cigar and half dreamily watched the play of the fountain a few yards away.

He was sitting thus when a man and a woman, both well dressed, came along and walked past him as if with the intention of taking seats on the bench behind him. The woman, who was dark and handsome, with greenish-gray eyes, a creamy complexion and full, red lips, gave the detective a suspicious glance as she passed him and then whispered something to her companion, a tall, elderly person with a grizzled mustache and a military bearing. Nick, whose interest was suddenly aroused, was not surprised when the woman stopped a few paces from him, turned and addressed him in Russian. The words were simply an inquiry about the band. Did it play after midnight? Nick's face was impassive as he replied in French that he did not understand what had been said to him. The woman smiled at this statement, and, shrugging her

shoulders, said, also in French, "It is nothing," bowed politely and then turned her back on him. The detective under ordinary circumstances would have scorned to be an eavesdropper, but on the present occasion he felt himself justified in remaining a while longer on the bench and using his ears. Without looking in the direction of the man and the woman, and apparently paying no attention to them, he listened with strange interest to the conversation carried on in Russian. Translated, it was as follows:

"We may talk without restraint," began the woman, "for that man yonder is either an American or an Englishman, and does not understand Russian."

"It is your affair, countess," replied the man in a deep bass. "If you are willing to take the chances, I shall make no objection."

"I am willing. Now, then, to business. Col. Kowitzky is in this city. I have discovered that he has taken rooms in a house in the Rue Lafitte. What is remarkable is that the house is the same in which you lodged last month."

"Good. And Madame Merival is in our pay."

"It was not for nothing that we installed her as the keeper of a lodging house, count."

"It was your idea, countess. But who would have thought that the fish would land in her net?"

"Fate is kind to us. And yet," she added, "we must not trifle with fate. What is to be done must be done to-night."

"It was to tell me this that you brought me here, was it?"

"You were at your club when I had put the finishing touches upon my little plan, and, as the matter was urgent, I sent a messenger to bring you out."

"And here I am. Now what is your plan?"

"Col. Kowitzky must never see the sun rise."

"How will you accomplish your purpose?"

"His wine will be drugged, and when it has taken effect, the windows of his room will be closed and the gas will be turned on. The newspapers will report it as a case of suicide."

"Madame Merival will attend to the wine, I presume?"

"Yes, and I will look out for the rest."

"And what part must I play?"

"You must have a carriage in readiness in front of my house, Rue de Provence, at four o'clock, just before daybreak. I will enter it, and you will order the driver to proceed to the St. Lazare Station to catch the early morning train for the south."

"How will you travel from the Rue Lafitte to the Rue de Provence?"

"In a cab for the greater part of the way. Do you wish me to fully explain my program?"

"Yes. It may not meet with my approval. You are sometimes reckless, countess, and good fatherly advice may not come amiss."

"Very well. If you were not truly my friend I might take offense at your tone. I may have been reckless in the past, but I have learned caution with experience. I shall go to the Rue Lafitte as a woman. As a woman I shall leave for the Rue de Provence. In my room I shall disguise myself, and it will be a young man who is being driven to the railway station."

"In that way you hope to cover up your tracks in case the verdict in Kowitzky's case should not be one of suicide, eh?"

"Certainly, count. And now, what is your opinion? Is not the plan a shrewd and a safe one?"

"Yes, I think you will be able to manage it. And your destination? First Cannes and then Italy, I presume?"

"Perhaps. We will consider that detail later, for, of course, you will go with me. First, you must see me safe to the house."

The conversation ceased. Nick Carter, with his back toward the countess and the count, was smoking placidly. The two conspirators arose, and as they passed the detective on their way to the boulevard, the woman again gave Nick's face the benefit of a sharp scrutiny. A block away a cab was standing. The man and the woman moved toward it, but when within a few yards of it, stopped, then turned and walked back to the bench by the fountain. "I must have dropped it when I left the bench," the countess said, as she reëntered the park. "If it is not there, then it is irretrievably lost."

The bench upon which Nick Carter had been sitting was vacant. He had gone and the park was deserted.

"I have found it," said the countess, as she picked up a small article from the ground in front of the bench she had occupied but a short time before. "I am lucky to-night," she went on with a laugh. "Don't you think so, count?"

The count muttered something in reply. The countess laughed again. "Wait," she said, "and you will see."

They retraced their steps to the boulevard. A few moments elapsed and then from behind a booth within earshot of the benches Nick Carter appeared. His eyes were shining with the excitement of a hunter hot on the trail of big game. The true meaning of the plot which the countess and her confederate had arranged, did not strike him until after he had listened for several minutes to the conversation and got his sharp wits actively at work. While it was probable that the conspirators had some sinister design against Col. Kowitzky, yet the murderous plot of the night was not to be directed wholly against the colonel, but had as one purpose and incentive the murder of Nick Carter.

The great detective, with his vast experience with criminals of all grades of position and intelligence, with his remarkable insight into the workings of the criminal mind, soon saw as he listened that the cunning brain of a woman

had evolved a scheme that carried with it the elements of success.

She knew, of course, that she was dealing with the premier detective of the world, but she had made the mistake of not giving him credit for the possession of the wonderful acumen with which he was endowed. The limits of his power were beyond her comprehension. She had laid a cunning trap and confidently expected him to fall into it.

As Nick, without loss of time, shadowed the pair, his thoughts in grasping the situation ran in this wise: "Col. Kowitzky is in danger, and he needs the services of a detective. Circumstances, suggested by the woman's words, imply that the colonel has to-day tried to see me. I remember that a note was placed on my desk while the association was in session, asking for an interview in the evening. No name was signed, but the writer stated that he was acting with necessary caution and that he would explain his position when we met. I sent back word by the bearer of the note that I would be pleased to see my would-be client at my room in the hotel before the banquet. He did not come. From what the woman said to-night, I believe she thinks that he did come and that I am in possession of all the facts in his case. I was, therefore, shadowed to the park, and my failure to respond when she addressed me in Russian, clinched the matter in her mind. She knows, of course, that I understand Russian and every other foreign language. Therefore, being convinced that I had taken the case of Col. Kowitzky, she spoke freely of her plans, and at the same time hugged the belief that she had aroused my interest to the extent of making me as putty in her hands. Her purpose is to have me shadow her to the house in the Rue Lafitte, to have me enter it and meet the fate she would have me believe had been intended for Col. Kowitzky. In one respect I shall comply with my lady's wishes. I shall enter the house. But the entrance will not be in the manner she desires."

Nick pursued his reflections until he saw the countess and her companion enter a cab, which was slowly driven off. "She is determined to afford me every facility for following her," he thought, with a smile, "but, if possible, I intend to be the first to reach the house."

Another cab was found half a block beyond the spot from whence the first had started, and entering it, Nick instructed the driver not to follow the other cab but to drive like the wind, and by the most direct way, for the house in the Rue Lafitte.

Arriving in front of the house and satisfied that he had come ten minutes in advance of the two conspirators, the detective dismissed the cabman and knocked at the *concierge's* door. It was opened by a man of fifty or thereabouts, with a sharp face, bushy black hair and eyebrows to match. His small, light blue eyes scintillated with excitement as he caught sight of the face of the caller.

"I am, like yourself, in the employ of the countess," said Nick, hurriedly. "The gudgeon took the bait and may be here before the arrival of our employer. If he does come," he added, fiercely, "the matter must be settled here in your room."

The doorkeeper's face paled. "No, no, I don't like that," he said, vehemently. "That is not according to program. He must be allowed to meet Kowitzky first."

Kowitzky! This announcement suggested something that Nick had not bargained for. "Is the count here now?" he asked.

"He came in ten minutes ago."

"Expecting to find Nick Carter here, eh?"

"Yes, and when he does meet him the game will be finished."

So the plot was a comprehensive one. Both the detective and Col. Kowitzky were to be trapped and murdered. The colonel had doubtless been lured to the house on the representation that he would meet Nick Carter there. Time was precious. The countess and the count might arrive at any moment. In a flash Nick's plan came to him.

"Go," he said, in a tone of authority, "and bring Kowitzky here."

"But," began the *concierge* in protest, when Nick sternly interrupted him. "You fool," he said, "do you want to incur my wrath? My power is greater than that of either the countess or the count. I am the chief of the French representatives of the Third Section. Go!"

The doorkeeper departed after he had given Nick a cringing bow.

Before two minutes had elapsed he returned with a slight, handsome man of about thirty. His face was very pale and thin. His eyes sparkled with pleasure when he saw Nick, but before he could speak the detective said to the *concierge*, "Leave us and go to Madame Merival. When I want you I will call you."

As soon as the man had passed out of hearing Nick said rapidly: "I am the detective you have been looking for, but I did not ask you to meet me here. The house is a trap, and it was my good luck which brought me here. Your enemies will arrive presently. When they come we must surprise them. Are you armed?"

"Yes. I always carry a revolver."

"Good. But there need be no shooting. Club your pistol and strike down the man. I will attend to the woman. Ready! They are coming."

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNTESS TURNS THE TABLES.

Count Lanski saw that the door was open and allowed the countess to precede him into the room. She was instantly seized by Nick Carter, while the count, stepping on the threshold, was attacked by Col. Kowitzky. But

the blow aimed with the clubbed pistol was a glancing one, and the man did not fall. He grappled with his adversary, and by virtue of superior strength, bore him to the floor. While they struggled, the detective, who had worked swiftly and effectively, laid the countess, securely bound, upon the couch on one side of the *concierge's* desk, and then turned to give his assistance to the colonel. As he did so he met with a surprise. From the doorway commanding a view of the staircase there rushed forward the *concierge* and a large, rawboned, hard-faced woman, the one armed with a murderous-looking club, the other with a poker. Nick ducked and sidestepped to avoid the double onslaught, and, using his head as a battering ram, struck the *concierge* in the pit of the stomach. The fellow, with a howl of keenest pain, doubled up and struck the floor with a thud. As he went over, Nick, raising his head, saw that the woman, who was Madame Merival, had become mixed up in the struggle which was going on between Col. Kowitzky and Count Lanski. In her furious rush to assault Nick Carter, she stumbled over the bodies of the two combatants, the poker coming down heavily upon the head of the count, who then had the upper hold and was choking the colonel into insensibility. The blow from the poker caused him to release his hands from his opponent's throat. Gasping for breath, the colonel wriggled his head sidewise so as to look into the face of Madame Merival. What he saw was not reassuring, and, as he endeavored to use his hands to defend himself against this new enemy, she dealt him a powerful blow between the eyes and then rose to her feet quickly for the purpose of giving her attention to the detective.

Nick was ready for her. Before she could stand erect he had her arms pinioned and would have succeeded in reducing her to submission had not the count, recovered from the effect of the blow given him with the poker, partly raised himself and grasped the detective by the legs.

Nick tried to kick, but, finding that the effort was vain, swung the woman around and sat her down somewhat forcibly on the head of the count. It is needless to say that the confederate of the countess ceased for the nonce to have any interest in Nick Carter's legs. He flattened on the floor with Madame Merival, foaming with rage, compulsorily making a seat of his face.

Col. Kowitzky, slowly rising to his feet, gazed on this scene, first with astonishment, then with amusement. The count was kicking his feet and squirming like a distressed eel. Nothing could be seen of his head, but a curious muffled noise emanated from the spot where it was supposed to be. The detective, pointing to the poker, said, quickly: "Take it and brain the count if he attempts to get up."

The colonel took the poker, Nick lifted Madame Merival to her feet and proceeded to serve her as he had served the countess. She made strong resistance, but was as a child in the grasp of the great detective. While he was thus occupied, he did not lose sight of the *concierge*. That disgruntled individual still lay on the floor groaning. Nick did not believe he was in any pain; he was probably pretending to be suffering for the purpose of escaping further active part in a contest which did not appeal to his better judgment.

Having disposed of Madame Merival, Nick handcuffed the count to the *concierge*. Up to this time not a word had been spoken. The detective relieved the tension by addressing these remarks to the countess:

"You did not think when you so cheerfully conversed in the park a while ago that there was a possibility that you might fail in your scheme of murder. In a word, you are not so smart as you thought you were."

The countess smiled. Her expression was one of amusement. Nick, looking her full in the face, was puzzled. Had she another card up her sleeve? She laughed softly and then said: "I did not expect, when I arranged a comedy, that it would, in presentation, touch on tragedy."

"What do you say to that, count?" asked Nick, with a twinkle in his eye.

"The countess has the floor," answered the count, with a sour face.

"And you think she will be able to pull you and herself out of the predicament?"

"I am sure of it."

The countess nodded her shapely head. "The count knows and has complete confidence in me," she went on. "I am his wife's sister. My name—I wish to conceal nothing—is Countess Paula Mittinka. The count, whose estates were confiscated some years ago, owing to a misunderstanding with the grand duke, is now endeavoring to rehabilitate his fortunes. He belongs to the Third Section, and when his term of service has expired, he will, if his record is clear, be permitted to possess his estates again and enter into full enjoyment of his rank."

"All this is foreign to the matter concerning which both you and the count are vitally interested," put in Nick, sharply.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Carter," rejoined the countess, with an unmoved countenance. "You will see its bearing presently. Perhaps you have forgotten that a member of the Third Section was permitted to join your International Detective Association."

"It was against my wish as expressed by voice and vote," said Nick, with a frown.

"I know," responded the countess, amiably, "and we are not your enemies because you did not see fit to fall in with our desires. You acted honestly and according to your own ideas of the situation."

"What the dickens is she driving at?" thought the perplexed detective.

The enlightenment was to come immediately. "The member of the Third Section who was honored by an

election to the ranks of the international detectives was not present when the vote was taken. Do you remember his name?"

"Yes," said Nick, as he tried to read the speaker's face; "it was Boris Felsmoi."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"Then allow me to make you acquainted with your Russian associate. Count Lanski, alias Boris Felsmoi, Mr. Nicholas Carter. Mr. Carter, Inspector Felsmoi, of the Russian Secret Service."

The count bowed ceremoniously. Nick, who was considering the countess' statement, and now had a dim idea of the game that was being played, never looked at the count. His eyes were on Col. Kowitzky's face, which wore a sneering smile.

"You don't believe me," the woman proceeded, without betraying any annoyance. "Well, I shall, before we leave this room, be able to convince you that I speak the truth. Now for the story of the night. That, I am sure," with an arch look, "will interest you. As I have said, we are not your enemies on account of your opposition to the count's election. But we were a little provoked at first and determined to play a practical joke on you."

"Was Col. Kowitzky included in the joke?" asked Nick, sarcastically.

"His presence was desired for the purpose of evening up matters; of furnishing a pleasing epilogue to the play. Let me explain. This house has long been our headquarters. Madame Merival is an honest, harmless woman. It was our intention to lure you here, overcome you and put you through an apparently dangerous, but really quite simple and amusing, bit of byplay. We hoped to be able to frighten you. In the end, however, we should have salved your wounded dignity by bringing forth Col. Kowitzky, who had made an appointment to meet you, but who was prevented by our interference."

"What do you know about my affair with the colonel?" questioned the detective, quickly.

"It is the business of the members of the Third Section to know many things," was the imperturbable reply. "We not only knew that the colonel hoped to meet you tonight, but we knew that he had reason to desire the services of such a shrewd and skillful detective as yourself."

"What have you to say to that?" said Nick, turning to the colonel.

"I have nothing to say. I am bewildered," was the reply.

"Do you know these persons?"

"No."

"But you believe they are your enemies?"

"I don't know what to believe."

Nick looked disgusted. The countess smiled and exchanged a significant glance with Count Lanski. Nick saw the glance and his wrath was intensified.

"You will have to tell your little fairy story to the chief of the secret service department of Paris," he said, coldly. "It is too flimsy to carry weight with me."

"The chief understands," said the countess, easily. "Send for him if you like. I can tell you where he is at this moment. He is at Baron Rosny's hotel in the next street."

There was defiance in the glance which she directed upon him.

Nick determined to test her story. If the woman held all the cards it were best that the game should end speedily.

Saying that he would guard the count, the detective asked Col. Kowitzky to step around to the baron's and request the immediate attendance of the chief of the detectives.

The colonel was gone fifteen minutes and returned with Berthier, Nick's friend of many years' standing.

"What's all this, Carter?" he asked, as his eyes swept the room. Then he added before Nick could speak: "Why, Felsmoi, is this you? What kind of a mess have you been getting into?"

"It is the result of trying to play a joke on Mr. Carter," answered the count, with a sheepish grin.

"It's a joke that I do not appreciate and one which you, Berthier, must regard as worthy of searching investigation," said Nick, soberly. "These people have sent for you, but they may wish they hadn't."

"I believe we have met before," said the countess to the chief. "I am the Countess Paula Mittinka."

"Yes, yes," replied the chief, with a courtly bow. "It was at the ball of the Russian ambassador last month. And now," fixing his eyes on Nick, "what is wanted?"

"My release and the release of the countess and her friends." It was the count who spoke.

"Are you under arrest?" asked Berthier.

"It amounts to the same thing. We are restrained of our liberty. And all because our joke failed to turn out as planned. Do you remember what I said to you late this afternoon?"

"Yes. You said you were going to have some fun with Carter to-night. You had arranged a practical joke and promised to inform me how it turned out."

"I spoke to you about Col. Kowitzky, did I not?"

"Yes. According to my recollection you said you were going to bring Mr. Carter and the colonel together. The one needed assistance and the other was the man of all men to give it."

"That's all. Now, Mr. Carter, are you satisfied?"

Nick, whose mind was made up as to his course of action, at once responded: "I am. There was a botch to-night. The least said about it the better."

The prisoners were released. The countess took the

arm of the count, and they walked toward the door. On the threshold the woman turned and, bestowing her sweetest smile on the detective, said in dulcet tones, "Good-night and pleasant dreams, Mr. Carter."

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY OF THE COLONEL.

When the door had closed on the count and countess, Nick Carter, with his back to Madame Merival and the *concierge*, who were sitting together on the bench near the desk, said to Berthier: "Perhaps I should have apologized to the countess for my rough treatment. But let it go as it is. She is satisfied and I am willing to call it square."

"Then there is nothing more to be said," remarked the chief.

"No. The affair is settled. Let us go."

The three men left the room. The detective did not say a word until they were out of sight of the house. Then he spoke. "The words I uttered in the *concierge's* room a few minutes ago," he said, "were solely for the benefit of the two persons we left there. It is well that their suspicions should not be awakened."

"I knew there was something under the surface, Carter. As you were running the circus, however, I let you have your own way."

"I will explain matters fully in the morning, Berthier. I have no time to-night, for I have much to say to Col. Kowitzky. The case is a very odd one, and I can talk better after I have had a little sleep. In the meantime, I wish you would have the house in the Rue Lafitte placed under surveillance. Have close watch kept over the movements of the *concierge* and Madame Merival."

"Why not arrest them to-night?" asked the colonel.

A queer smile played about Nick's lips. "And have them initiated into the mysteries of the chief's third degree?" he replied. "I am afraid the chief will not consent to such a move."

"Why not?" replied the colonel, who since his departure from the house seemed to have resolved his doubts into certainties.

The chief's brows were contracted. As he did not speak at once, Nick spoke for him.

"I think I understand the position of our official friend, colonel," he said, slowly. "He does not care to take chances. Russia and France are allies, and it might cost Berthier his official head if he were to arrest and subject to severe examination two servants of an accredited representative of the Third Section. If he were assured that they are guilty of a serious infringement of the law, he could afford to make the arrest. But there is no such assurance. Although he has not been told the story of the night's happenings in detail and from our standpoint, yet his shrewd perception has, beyond doubt, enabled him to grasp the true situation. But when the truth is enveloped in a cloud of subterfuge, when he is forced to seriously consider the story told by that adept in cunning, the countess, a story that receives an apparently partial corroboration in the statement made to him by the count that a practical joke was this night to be played upon me, the danger of acting in accordance with the dictates of his better judgment becomes obvious. Berthier must believe," Nick went on, calmly, "that it was no joke that was designed for to-night. He will do all in his power to assist us. Of that you may be assured, colonel."

"Carter speaks the truth," said the chief, earnestly. "I will do what I can, but in regard to the persons we left in the house, I am on delicate ground. Carter has stated my position better than I could do it myself."

The chief returned to the hotel of Baron Rosny, where he had some unfinished business to transact, while Nick and Col. Kowitzky repaired to the detective's quarters. It was two o'clock in the morning, time for bed, but Nick was determined to hear the colonel's story before seeking the rest he so much needed.

Installed in an easy-chair, and with a cigar lighted, the great detective said: "Now I am ready to hear what you have to say."

"The story will be a strange one," replied the colonel.

"I inferred as much."

"I have been followed relentlessly and tirelessly, Mr. Carter, ever since I left Russia, three years ago. During all that time I have not seen my wife and children. My estates have been confiscated, my wife has been reduced to poverty, and all my efforts to get her and the children out of Russia have failed. She must have written to me, but, of course, all her letters have been withheld and probably destroyed."

"What is your crime?" asked the detective.

"I do not know."

"Do you understand the reason of this persecution?"

"I do not. I presume that Count Lanski and Countess Mittinka are my enemies, but I don't know why they should be."

"How about your wife? May she not have incurred the displeasure of the Third Section, or of persons having influence with it?"

"I do not think so. In fact, I am satisfied that I am the person whose punishment is desired."

"It may be a government affair, and the Third Section simply the instrument."

"I have ceased to speculate about it. The mystery has defied solution."

"Give me all the facts, colonel."

"I am anxious to do so. Three years ago I left Moscow hurriedly and secretly to avoid arrest.

"I was innocent of wrongdoing. I had no enemies, and when one of my friends, whose brother held an im-

portant post under the minister of the interior, came to my house at night and told me that an order for my arrest had been issued, I was thunderstruck.

"But I would have remained and made a fight, had not my wife begged me with tears in her eyes to flee. Before coming to Moscow, where my estates are, I had been for many years an assistant to the minister of war.

"I resigned ostensibly on account of ill health, but really because I was not in sympathy with the policy of the government.

"But I had kept my opinions to myself, and I am confident that no one outside of my wife knew what they were. The minister was sorry to have me go, and at parting expressed the hope that, with returning health, I might reënter the service of the government.

"I escaped from Russia and went to Shanghai, where under an assumed name I sought and obtained employment as assistant secretary to the British consul.

"A few months after my arrival in Shanghai, I learned that my estates had been seized and my wife and children driven from Moscow. In trying to ascertain their whereabouts, I was betrayed by a Russian in whom, in my extremity, I had been compelled to place confidence, and carried to the fortress of Vladivostok. I was there for a year, and then escaped by bribing a Japanese sea captain to take me on his ship. Owing to his intimacy with the governor of the fortress—this was before the breaking out of war—he was able to effect my escape. When I reached the ship, I was hidden inside of a couch in the chart room.

"From Vladivostok I went to Nagasaki, where I was recognized by a Russian spy and compelled to flee for safety to Singapore. Here my life was attempted. I had secured a situation as sub-inspector at the botanic garden, and was returning one evening to my hotel when I was set upon by two semi-naked coolies armed with krises.

"If the attack of each had been made from in front I might have made some sort of a defense, but one struck from behind as I was preparing to meet the other, and his kris cleft my shoulder and sent me forward into the arms of his associate.

"Well, the fiends left me for dead upon the ground. I would have died from loss of blood, I think, if a Hindoo money lender had not discovered and brought medical assistance in the nick of time. For days I was at death's door, and it was weeks before I could leave my bed. All efforts to find the assassins utterly failed.

"A month after my recovery a note in Russian was left under my door. It stated that the writer was a friend who was anxious to assist me in communicating with my wife. On account of spies, he was compelled to hide his identity and act in secret. He was on board of a government steamer in the harbor, and would be pleased to see me there at a certain hour.

"I suspected a trap, but the desire to learn what had become of my wife and children was so strong that I resolved to go out to the steamer. My coming was expected, for no sooner had I set foot upon the deck than I was informed that I was a prisoner.

"The steamer carried a party of Sikhs, and when we arrived at Klang, I was taken by the Sikhs to a little nameless spot on the way to the Pahang. My place of confinement was a bungalow in a deserted plantation. After escorting me to the bungalow, the Sikhs departed, leaving me in the custody of three Malays, the leader of whom spoke fair English, and had a clean-cut and intelligent face. He was not averse to conversation, but I could not induce him to tell me of what I was accused. I was guarded night and day.

"I slept on a mat of woven palms, and one Malay was left as a guard every hour of the twenty-four.

"One night the sentry fell asleep. He was a confirmed opium smoker, and he exceeded his usual supply of the drug. I took advantage of my opportunity and made my escape. I went through a dense jungle to the river; found a small prau and rowed downstream.

"More than once I was in danger of capsizing on account of the rocks, shoals and floating limbs of trees, but I resolutely kept on, preferring death in the Malayan wilds to the fate that my unknown enemies had in store for me.

"But luck favored me. The next forenoon, when I was half starved, I reached the broad Semantan River, and came in sight of a large prau, flying the American flag. I rowed for it, and was taken on board and treated with every courtesy by the commander and his patron, a scientist from the Smithsonian Institute.

"My story enlisted their sympathies, and they promised to assist me in escaping from the country.

"They were as good as their word. A week later I became a passenger on an American steamer bound for New York.

"I had not been in the American metropolis a month before my enemies again showed their hands. One day a package was sent to my room. I had sense enough not to open it, but took it to the police station. It proved to be an infernal machine.

"The next day I left New York and journeyed to San Francisco. I was followed, and in that city twice assaulted. Each occasion was a close call. From California I went to South America, and thence to Paris. I have been here ever since. For a long time I was not molested.

"My unknown enemies, probably, had not discovered my whereabouts; but within the past three months four attempts on my life have been made. Once I was poisoned by drinking wine in a cafe; another time I was thrown into the Seine, and a third time sandbagged and left for dead. A few hours ago, the fourth attempt to

kill me was made. Nowhere am I safe, for I have been tracked around the world."

"Have you heard from your wife, directly or indirectly, since your arrival in Paris?"

"I have received what purported to be information, but placed no confidence in it. Several months ago, before any attack on me had been made in Paris, I was sitting in the Louvre, when a very beautiful woman, a blonde, who bore a striking resemblance to my wife, and who also had the eyes and voice of the woman who calls herself the Countess Mittinka, approached, called me by name and said she was a friend of my wife, and had recently come from Russia.

"I invited her to take a seat by my side, and anxiously asked for information concerning my loved ones. She said they were in Odessa waiting for a word from me. My wife, she said, had heard I was in Paris, but had not tried to communicate with me because she did not know my assumed name.

"I will say here, Mr. Carter, that I have been known in this city as Capt. Carlov. How Count Lanski and Countess Mittinka discovered my identity in the man whose life has been so many times attempted, is a mystery."

"Mysteries are easily penetrated by the members of the Third Section," said Nick, as he lighted a fresh cigar. Then he added: "Have you anything more to tell?"

"Yes. I have not yet told you all the woman said to me in the Louvre. She was very sympathetic, and hoped that I might soon have my wife and children with me. I thought it strange that my wife should have sent no letter by the hand of this self-styled friend, and when I spoke of the matter, the woman attempted to explain the omission by saying that, as there was danger in writing, an oral message had been sent instead. The message was, 'Come to me at once.' On the impulse of the moment I said: 'I will go;' and the woman, who had given her name as Olga Marovitch, a governess, left with a smile of satisfaction.

"In my room that evening, I reviewed the conversation, and came to the wise conclusion that another snare had been laid for me. I did not go to Odessa, and a week later narrowly escaped death by poison."

Col. Kowitzky paused and looked at Nick inquiringly.

"Is that all?" asked the detective.

"That is all."

"Are you a nihilist?"

"No," in surprise. "Why do you ask?"

"Out of curiosity. I am trying to get at the reason for this persecution." Another question: "Is your wife Russian born?"

"No. She is a Bulgarian. Her father is Count Waldemar, of Dannenbrach."

Nick Carter pricked up his ears. "Has he not been an aspirant for the throne of Marixburg?"

"Yes."

"And is he not at the present time sequestered in a hospital for the insane?"

"I believe so."

"Is the daughter his only child?"

"Yes."

"Then I must see your wife. She holds the key to this mystery."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE WOLVES' DEN.

Col. Kowitzky stared hard at Nick Carter. "You said you must see my wife," he exclaimed. "But how can you do that? You don't know where she is."

"Count Lanski may tell me," replied the detective, calmly. "By the way, what do you know of the count? Anything?"

"I have heard his name mentioned as a Russian who had offended the government and had been disciplined. I met him for the first time at the house in the Rue Lafitte."

"That was not your first meeting with the countess, though. You had met her before that in the Louvre."

Col. Kowitzky thought a moment. "I believe you are right," he said.

"I am certain of it. And she is the one you will have to look out for. The count is small potatoes, although he is a member of the Third Section. After breakfast in the morning I shall hunt up the count and interview him."

The colonel wanted an explanation, but Nick, who believed he had said enough for the present, proposed bed and postponement, until daylight, of a further consideration of the colonel's case.

Accommodations for the colonel were found in the hotel, and he parted with Nick with the understanding that they were to meet at the breakfast table.

The detective was worn out with the work and excitement of the past twenty-four hours, and resolutely dismissing from his mind all thought of the mysterious case of the Russian colonel, closed his eyes as soon as he had crept between the sheets, and soon was sleeping soundly.

He was up betimes, and on entering the dining room found the colonel. After a hasty breakfast, they took a cab, and were driven to the office of Chief Berthier.

"Well, Carter," said the French official, as he grasped Nick's hands, cordially. "What have you got in that noddle of yours? Something new?"

"I have quite a problem; but, before anything else is said, ease my mind. Are Madame Merival and the *concierge* still at the house in the Rue Lafitte?"

"They were there an hour ago, and the countess was with them. She came to the house at seven o'clock."

"Good. We must find out where she is staying."

"I can tell you that. She is at the Hotel Desir. Baron Rosny so informed me, and I saw him to verify the information early this morning. The count is a guest at the same caravansary."

This was cheering news. One difficulty had been removed.

"I will now satisfy my curiosity," said Nick, and he at once began a recital of the facts connected with the case of Col. Kowitzky, his own adventures of the night before forming not the least interesting part of them.

The chief said nothing for a few moments after the detective had finished. His face was very grave.

"I am afraid this is a state affair," he said. "The Third Section, representing the Russian Government, had decided upon Col. Kowitzky's death, though at first his imprisonment would have satisfied its vengeance."

"Perhaps," said Nick, "though I doubt it. His enemies were at one time willing to defer the taking of extreme measures, but the colonel's success as a prison breaker probably convinced them that if they expected to win in the game they were playing, they must put the colonel out of the way for good and all. In speaking of his enemies, I am not referring to the czar and his advisers."

"You forget the Third Section, Carter," said the chief, "and you also forget the confiscation of the colonel's estates and the occasions on which he was arrested and imprisoned, each time by official order. If this isn't a state affair, I never heard of one."

"I have not the evidence to convince you that this is a mixed affair, in which personal considerations prevail, and the Russian Government is simply a blind tool, but I can express my opinion and give my reasons for it," said Nick, coolly and confidently. "In the first place, this Felsmoi or Count Lanski is not a trained detective. I'll admit that he represents the Third Section, but if it were really and solely an affair of the czar's, the Third Section, acting for the czar or his ministers, would have sent on this mission of death some one more capable and experienced than Felsmoi."

"May he not be acting as subordinate to the Countess Mittinka?"

"Meaning that she is the chief representative of Russian's powerful secret service bureau?"

"Yes."

"During your long service and with your facilities for acquiring secret information, chief, you must have learned the names of all, or nearly all, the agents and spies of the Russian detective bureau who have operated in Paris. Am I not right?"

"I have learned much," replied Berthier, with a look of understanding.

"Have you ever heard, or is it within your knowledge, that the Countess Mittinka is an agent or spy of the Third Section?"

"No, Carter, but, all the same, she may have been employed for years, operating, however, in other European cities. This may be her first visit to Paris."

"Hardly, for they all come to Paris at some time or other."

"She may be a new appointee."

"The plot which she attempted to carry out last night, Berthier, was not concocted by a new hand at the business. No, the countess has had years of experience as a secret service agent. But her work has not been done for the Russian Government. She is an English woman."

"Nonsense, Carter," said the chief, in a tone of contemptuous disbelief. "You have gone beyond the limit. The woman is a Slav. Her appearance shows that plainly."

"You had but one glimpse of her," returned Nick, serenely, as he knocked the ashes from his cigar, "while I have had several. In fact, I have had opportunity to observe her closely. She is made up as a Russian. She is an accomplished actress, acquainted with all the tricks of making-up. I heard her speak both in Russian and in French, and she speaks each language almost as well as a native. 'Almost,' I said, for my ears detected a slight accent found only in the speech of an English person. It may be in your power, Berthier, to assist me in locating her. Not many years ago the relations between France and Russia were strained. Some of your best diplomats feared that a complete rupture would result, and that England would profit by the loss of France. If I had been in your place at that time I would have made it my business to obtain a list of the English spies whose work lay beyond the Balkans. Perhaps I would have gone further. I might have put my spies on the track of those who were apt to become the enemy's spies."

Nick paused and smilingly regarded the great chief of Paris' detective system.

"Carter, I am beginning to think that there is more in you than I had given you credit for," responded the chief, with an expression of mingled wonder and appreciation. "I did the very thing which you have suggested." Opening a drawer in his desk, he brought out a small book. "The names are here," he said. "Shall I read them?"

Nick nodded affirmatively. Berthier read the names of about twenty persons who were labeled as secret agents of the English Government. Two were women. The description of one caused Nick's eyes to sparkle. "Madame Pembroke, twenty-five years of age, tall, finely proportioned, pronounced blonde, greenish-gray eyes, nose slightly *retroussé*, full, red lips, the lower one pro-

truding a little. Speaks French, German and Russian. Was an actress before she became a spy. Her only sister is the wife of Count Lanski, a Russian."

"Now, what do you say?" he asked. "Madame Pembroke, English woman, answers the description of the Countess Mittinka, except as to age, and the disparity in years is accounted for by the lapse of time. The countess is about thirty. Five years ago, when you took that description, she was twenty-five. But her lips are still red, her eyes are still greenish gray and her under lip has not ceased to protrude."

"I give in," said Berthier. "Now I am all at sea. Is it your opinion that she still is acting for the British Government?"

"She is acting both for herself and that power. She has also, under false pretenses, obtained the support of the czar, who, I believe, does not know that she is contemplating murder. But she has *carte blanche* from the Third Section; and if a certain person dies no questions will be asked."

"You are talking in riddles, Carter. I'd like to be enlightened. What is the plot? And why has Col. Kowitzky been selected as the victim?"

Nick chewed his cigar thoughtfully. "I have made a guess at the mystery, Berthier, but I would prefer not to announce it until after I have talked with Count Lanski. You might regard it as the vagary of an unbalanced mind. It involves a great conspiracy in which the stake is a throne. I need a few facts to support my contention before I shall feel that I am ready to talk to the point."

Col. Kowitzky listened to this statement with amazement. "If you have scented the mystery, Mr. Carter," said he, "I hope you will be able to enlighten me before the day is out. I know I could not sleep a wink with the knowledge of my exact position withheld."

"If I can make the count talk, and I think I can, he will tell me where your wife may be found. And he will tell me more. His hotel is but a short distance from here. If you will wait here, colonel, I will return inside of an hour and both you and Berthier know all that I know."

The colonel said he would wait, and Nick immediately took his leave.

The detective expected to find the countess with the count, but was better satisfied, when in answer to his card the count himself appeared, and said he was alone and would be pleased to see the American detective. When they were seated Nick came to the point. "I did not come here to beat about the bush. You won out last night. The countess' story of a practical joke was accepted but it was not believed. You represent the Third Section, but it is in order that you may do the work which the countess has mapped out and which personally concerns her."

The count said nothing, but sat looking steadily at the detective, fingering the ends of his grizzled mustache.

"The Russian Government, particularly the police branch of it, has been deceived. You may be honest in the sense that your interests are the interests of Russia, that you are or believe yourself to be a faithful subject of the czar, but the mission on which you are engaged is one that, if its real objects were known in St. Petersburg, would result in your disgrace and also in your death at the hands of the executioner."

The count, in nowise disturbed by this statement, smiled and said: "I had not regarded you as a dreamer, Mr. Carter."

"This is no dream, count," returned Nick, a trifle nettled. "I am going to deal with hard facts. I shall prove to you that in playing into the hands of the countess you are also playing into the hands of England."

"Rubbish!" was the contemptuous response. "I am here in Paris on official business, the nature of which I cannot disclose, and it has no relation to English affairs and none whatever with the affairs of Col. Kowitzky."

"You insist, then, that it was a practical joke and nothing more, which you and the countess attempted to play upon me last night?"

"That and nothing more. You cannot prove that anything serious was intended." The count leaned back in his chair, thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at Nick with an amused smile.

The detective might have been irritated over the attitude of the count if he had not become assured that the Russian had not the remotest suspicion that his secret, either in whole or in part, had been guessed by the man who sat in front of him. As it was, Nick said, in his smoothest voice: "Then I suppose you will be willing to answer any questions that do bear upon the matter which has brought you to this city."

"I see no reason why I should give you any information about myself or—my friends." This was said almost insolently.

"Very well. Suit yourself. You are on the verge of a precipice and you don't know it. It may become necessary for me to go to the Russian ambassador, and, after telling him a strange but interesting story, demand your recall to answer the charge of conspiracy against the czar's government."

"I hope I am not delaying you," replied the count, with no sign of nervousness or fear.

"You may try to before I leave this room," was the quiet answer. "If the ambassador were to learn that a trusted member of the Third Section had associated himself with a spy in the employ of the English Government and was using his official influence to further a private scheme that comprehended a murder, he might obtain permission from the French Government to have you placed under arrest at once."

Count Lanski for the first time showed perturbation. "What do you know?" he asked, abruptly.

"Enough to hang you," was the confident reply.

This was not the truth, but Nick had made a shrewd guess, and was desirous of testing the count.

"I know that the Countess Mittinka," continued Nick, "has for years been an English spy, and that she is still acting in that capacity."

"It's a lie!" exclaimed the count, hoarsely.

"You can easily ascertain the truth. Wire your London chief and he will tell you whether or not I have lied."

The count arose to his feet. "I'll do it, and without an instant's loss of time. It won't take more than an hour to procure the evidence that will stamp you a——"

"Don't, say it," interrupted Nick, suavely. "Leave something to the imagination."

The Russian scowled and then went to a desk, and, taking a telegraph blank, wrote hurriedly. Having finished his work, he showed it to Nick and then rang for a messenger. "It's a rush message," he said, as the messenger departed, "and if the chief is accessible, we may have to wait but a little while."

Until the answer had been received, Nick did not desire to continue the conversation along the line of personal attack. General subjects were brought up and discussed pleasantly enough, though the count appeared far from being at ease. The cool demeanor of the detective, the quiet assurance with which he had made a startling charge, had at last had an effect upon the mind of the Russian. When an hour had elapsed he was in a fever of impatience.

At last the answer came. The count had it in his hands when the countess walked into the apartment. The count read the telegram before he looked up. His face was twitching and there was a strange gleam in his eye as it met the inquiring look of the countess. "You—you devil!" he hissed, and sprang toward her, as if to seize her by the throat.

The countess seemed lost in amazement. The presence in the room of the detective had not surprised her, for she had expected that Nick Carter would seek an interview with her confederate. Such, however, was her confidence in her security, and in the ability of the count to hold his own with the American manhunter, she had refrained from trying to prevent their meeting. But the attitude of the count convinced her that the detective had made an important discovery. More than that, he was trying to create a breach between her and the man whose services she had enlisted in her interests. "What does all this mean?" she demanded, angrily. "Have you taken leave of your senses, count?"

"He has just come into possession of them," said Nick, curtly. "He now knows who you are and how he has been hoodwinked. The telegram which he has just read informs him that you are not working for Russia, but are a spy in the employ of the British Government."

Instead of showing either fear or surprise, the countess laughed softly. "Is that all?" she said. "Then let me inform you that the work on which I am now engaged has met with the sanction of both the English and Russian Governments. Of course you can have no conception of what that work is," with an expression in which cool confidence was mingled with disdain, "and, therefore, can have no understanding of either my position or the position of the count."

She ceased speaking, and, looking straight at the count, smiled sweetly. Nick's countenance did not change. But the count's anger had disappeared. Apparently he had listened, with relief and joy, to the words of the beautiful woman who had spoken with such assurance.

The detective knew that his task would be a hard one, but he was determined, before he left the room, to expose what he believed to be the woman's duplicity, and also make the count realize that he was walking on very thin ice.

"Have you heard the latest news from Marixburg?" he asked, with his eyes on the countess' face. "The Inner Council will choose a queen two months hence. The popular candidate is the daughter of Count Waldemar of Dannenbrach."

The countess' cheeks paled suddenly. As for the count, he stared at Nick Carter in dumb amazement. For a moment there was dead silence. Then the countess, with a steely glitter in her eyes, stepped quickly to the door and closed and locked it. As she placed the key in her pocket she said, slowly, but with deadly meaning: "I will admit that I have underestimated your abilities, Mr. Carter. You cannot know all, but you know too much for my safety. You will never leave this room alive."

CHAPTER V.

A GAME OF WITS.

Nick Carter drew his revolver, rested it across his arm, and, backing to the wall, faced the count and countess, waiting for the game to begin. He felt that the threat of the countess had not been uttered for effect. She had meant every word.

His enemies made no movement when the detective placed himself on the defensive. The count stood with folded arms, cool and smiling; the countess, serious of countenance, went on calmly: "There will be no shooting in this room unless you shall begin it, Mr. Carter, and I don't think you are the kind of man to shoot in cold blood. We shall not use firearms to carry out our purpose."

"Don't speak for me, please," said Nick, with a sneer. "There are other agencies of death besides guns and pistols. I am handicapped. This is your room or the

count's, which is the same thing, and its armament has not yet been disclosed. My revolver must be my main protection. How would you regard it if I fired in the air and brought the proprietor and his force here?"

"You might fire until you had used up all your cartridges," replied the countess, with unmoved face, "and no help would come. This hotel has been leased by an agent of the Third Section. Every employee is in my pay. You have allowed yourself to fall into a trap. As I said before, you will never leave this room alive."

The detective looked about him and saw nothing but ordinary furniture. Then his eyes turned to the floor. There was no carpet, but several rugs covered over half the space of the polished boards. He could make only a blind guess of the countess' intention. And while the situation was an alarming one, Nick betrayed no concern. Apparently undismayed at the words of the evil-minded woman, he said: "Perhaps you are not aware that the chief of the Paris detective force knows I am here and is awaiting my return. If I am not in his office in half an hour he will suspect something has gone wrong and will come here to make an investigation."

"Let him. He will find neither you, nor the count, nor myself. The proprietor will tell him that we left here this morning and have taken quarters in another part of the city. He may make a search, but nothing will come of it. He may find us, but he won't make an arrest on suspicion. You will have mysteriously disappeared, but there will not be found evidence that we are responsibile for your absence. To sum up: You will have ceased to trouble us and we will be absolutely secure."

The countess, having had her say, gave the count a meaning glance and then moved toward the door opening into the sleeping apartment of the suit. The count followed her, but without turning his back or removing his eyes from the detective's person. Nick, possessed with the idea that the danger of his position would be enhanced with his enemies out of sight, resolved to prevent their departure. Two quick strides brought him to the middle of the room. The countess had her hand on the knob of the door when these words, uttered in a voice charged with deadly meaning, caused her to turn: "Don't open that door!"

Now it was that the count threw his hand back, as if to draw a pistol, but the countess quickly laid her hand upon his arm and whispered: "Wait!" Nick, with his own weapon pointed toward them, heard the words, and supplemented them with this remark: "It will be well for him to wait. The game is mine, now."

A slight pallor crept into the cheeks of the woman. She bit her lip and frowned. "You are counting without your host," she said, coldly. "We are in no danger whatever, while as for you——"

"As for me," Nick interrupted, "the danger point has passed. I have guessed your murderous plan. The means to compass my death are in the next room. If you and your weak-kneed tool could only reach it and have me shut in here, then my life might not be worth the snap of your finger. But you shall not enter that room, at least, not for the present. I back up the statement with the revolver I have here. You see its advantage, now, don't you?" Nick showed his teeth, and his smile was not a pleasant one. The count trembled and cast an uneasy glance at the countess, whose eyes were snapping viciously.

"The fact that this hotel is controlled by the agents of the Third Section," the detective went on, easily, "now insures my advantage. No attention will be paid to pistol shots. If I shall kill both of you, there will be nothing to prevent my safe departure from the building. Again, if I can hold you here until the arrival of the chief of detectives, my point will also be gained.

"As for your threat that I shall not leave this room alive, while it was not made as a bluff, you said it without a thorough understanding of the enemy's resources. Would you like to withdraw it, countess?"

Nick inclined his head in mock politeness, an amused smile playing about his lips.

Her features convulsed with rage, the countess took one quick step toward the cool, self-contained detective, whose smile deepened and became more exasperating. But it was the sight of the pointed revolver which arrested the advance of the enraged woman. She clinched her hands in the impotence of savage wrath, while her voice, harsh and trembling, lifted in a fierce onslaught on the man who had dared to oppose her.

"You may win in this opening skirmish," she said, "but death will come to you soon. Every moment you remain in Paris you stand upon a mine. There is no escape for you. We are not the only ones you have to fight against. We are but instruments. The real power once aroused, will crush you as I would crush a worm. Why have you interfered in a matter that America has no interest in? You are a meddling interloper. You think you are smart because you imagine you have circumvented us. If I were a man I would challenge you to a duel to the death. I hate you!"

This speech increased Nick's confidence. He was safe as long as he could keep his enemies from operating from the other room. He had guessed at the situation, and the words of the countess had assured him that his surmise was right. But the object for which he had come to the hotel had not yet been accomplished.

"I have been greatly entertained by your remarks," he said to the woman, "but I am not prepared to believe that you are backed by such a power as you have stated. In fact, I don't believe that beyond a few hirelings in Paris you have anybody at your beck and call. You are acting under the authority of the Third Section, but the scheme

which you are trying to work is a personal one, and you are using the Third Section, instead of having the Section use you. Do you care to have me tell you what your scheme is?"

"I do not care to listen to a fairy tale," replied the countess, with a curl of the lip.

"Let him talk," whispered the count. "We have as much to gain from delay as he has. I don't believe the chief of detectives will come here to look him up for several hours, if he comes at all."

Nick, who did not overhear this, but who had a shrewd idea that they were waiting for reënforcements, determined upon a new move. He would expose his hand immediately. If the countess were out of the way he thought he could play a very interesting game with the count.

"As we are likely to remain in this room for some time," he said, "I would suggest that we take seats and make the hour or half hour pass as comfortably as possible."

So saying, he moved to a chair and sat down, his pistol still covering the man and woman.

Black looks passed between the two conspirators. After a moment's irresolution they followed the detective's example.

"That's right," remarked Nick, pleasantly, "for now we may talk with ease. May I smoke?" he asked.

The countess, who had partially recovered her composure, and, who at the same time was feeling a secret admiration for the man of nerve, nodded her head. The detective took out his cigar case, selected a cigar and replaced the case in his pocket. As he did so, he glanced at the count, said "I beg your pardon," and, taking out the case again, threw it to the count, who caught it with a bow. He, too, selected a cigar, and then tossed the case back to Nick. Each having lighted his weed, the smoking began, and nothing was said for several moments. Then, as the count's body swayed and his head began to fall forward, the countess, with a cry of fear, sprang to his side.

He was toppling over as she reached him, and fell into her arms. As she bent over his body, a powerful arm encircled her waist, while another quickly pressed a gag into her mouth. Before she could fairly realize what had happened, she found her arms securely bound behind her.

There was a divan in the room. Nick placed her upon it with her head raised on a cushion. The detective then proceeded to the count, and tied his arms close to his sides. This work accomplished, he sat down and calmly resumed his cigar. From the divan the discomfited countess watched him with murder in her gaze.

"I have been waiting for the chief of detectives, and you have been waiting for the *concierge*, or Madame Merival, or both," said Nick, to the woman. "I now hope that your reënforcements will appear. For if you will not tell me what I desire to know, they will.

"The count was about ready to come over to my side when you came in and interfered. As soon as he revives, he will be furnished with good reasons why he should cut loose from your control." The countess' shoulders twitched. She seemed to be making a violent effort to free herself. Nick watched her contortions and convulsive workings of her countenance with a sense of satisfaction. He had no pity for her. In his experienced eyes, she was but slightly removed from a fiend incarnate. By her actions she had unsexed herself. In dealing with her he was obliged to shut his eyes to physical facts and to allow his mind to regard her as a thing beyond the pale of mercy.

"I am really surprised," he proceeded, as he watched the smoke of his cigar curl toward the ceiling, "that you and the count should have been taken in by such an antique dodge as a doped cigar. I had small faith in it, but the situation was desperate and so I was forced to try it. Left as he is, the count is booked for half a day's sleep. But I have an antidote which will bring him to and enable him to talk in about three minutes." The detective followed this statement by the production of a small phial. Removing the cork, he stepped to the side of the unconscious man, and, kneeling beside him, poured some of the liquid down the count's throat. The effect was instantaneous. The count gasped, opened his eyes, saw the face of Nick Carter, and, after staring up at the detective a moment, said huskily: "What have you done to her?"

"She is here," was the answer, "and in my power. There has been a shifting of positions. I am in charge of affairs. That means prison for both of you unless you confess."

"I have nothing to confess," replied the count, stubbornly and without looking at the detective.

"When you understand things a little better you may change your mind," said Nick, smoothly. "We can converse without interruption from the countess. But before I begin a story that should open your eyes, I will investigate the next room.

"Madame Merival, if she comes, may enter by that way, and, knowing what the other room contains, may have an advantage likely to result in harm to me."

Nick glanced at the countess as he spoke, and noted her change of expression. She had listened to the detective's first words with sullen anger, but the emotion was succeeded by one of despair when Nick announced his intention to go into the next room.

From the countess' right hand, which had tightly clutched it, the key was obtained and the door was opened. The room which he entered was small and had been used as a chamber. But on one side of the door was a stand upon which were bottles, tubes, wires and an air

gun. The sight of the gun sent a hard look into Nick's eyes. He took it up and then glanced upward along the wall. In one corner the cornice had been cut so as to provide an aperture half a foot square. Under it and resting against the wall was a ladder. Nick mounted it and saw that the cornice of the room which now held the count and countess had been altered, so that by pressing a button a section of the cornice, three or four inches, would slide back and permit a view of the apartment. The manner of death prepared for him by the countess was now clearly apparent. He was to have been shot with an air gun from the aperture.

Nick returned to the other apartment, leaving the door open and taking a seat so that his eyes could command a view of the outer door of the room where he had found the murderous devices. He had something to say, and hoped to be able to say it before the arrival of either friend or enemy.

Addressing himself to the count, he began: "In spite of the telegram from London, which states that the Countess Mittinka is an English spy, you do not yet believe that she has deceived you. Her statement that England and Russia are in accord as far as a certain scheme is concerned, in which she has enlisted your cooperation, has been accepted by you as the truth. I am going to try to prove to you that it is not the truth."

"You will find it hard work to do that," said the count, with an indifferent expression.

"We shall see. The scheme is to put some one on the throne of Marixburg."

The count started. He looked at the countess, who was making a vain endeavor to speak. There was a look of fear in her eyes. The count observed it and was uncomfortable.

Nick went on calmly: "The principality is now governed by a regent whose reign will cease when the choice of a ruler is made by the Council. The time for that choice is near at hand. Russia is willing that the daughter of Count Waldemar should occupy the throne. The Countess Mittinka is also willing, nay, she is anxious, that this choice shall be made. But is England favorable to the scheme? England," said Nick, slowly, "backs the countess and is laughing at Russia's stupidity."

"Russia's stupidity?" repeated the count, wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Russia is being hoodwinked. Count Waldemar's daughter, who is the wife of Col. Kowitzky, will not, if the countess' scheme is carried out, be the princess. The world, excepting England, will believe that she is the ruler. But the ruler will be quite another person, the Countess Mittinka, in fact."

CHAPTER VI.

THE COUNT PLAYS HIS HAND.

Count Lanski, though amazed at Nick Carter's knowledge, was not shaken in his support of the countess. Despite his predicament, he smiled when the detective paused.

Nick was prepared for the count's attitude. "I have not told you any news," he said. "I know it, but what I said was simply introductory to something that is unknown to you. But first I wish to ask you a question which you can, without compromising yourself, readily answer. Is your wife living?"

The count hesitated, looked at the countess in a peculiar manner and then said: "She is dead."

Nick Carter, with quick penetration, arrived at a fact that had hitherto been out of his calculations. The hesitation of the count, the quick glance in the countess' direction, the answer that at last came, all conspired to reveal a secret that rounded off the story he had constructed partly by shrewd guesswork, partly by the aid of facts and masterly deductions. It was, therefore, with an access of confidence that he resumed his statement.

"You have lied," he said, quietly. "Your wife is not dead. She is here in this room. You married sisters. Your first wife is dead. Your second wife is the countess."

The count's face flushed. But the color quickly receded, leaving it pale as ashes. "Curse you!" he hoarsely ejaculated. "If I had only known that you were so well informed, I would have killed you when you entered this room."

"And had reason afterward to be sorry for the action. In time you would have learned the truth, and then regretted that you did not kill the countess instead of the detective. Listen and I will tell you the whole story of the scheme which was meant to dishonor you and add to the power and wealth of the countess. Some years ago Mrs. Pembroke, who now calls herself the Countess Mittinka, saw the wife of Col. Kowitzky and noticed the resemblance to herself.

"She thought nothing of the matter at the time, but when, in her capacity of spy for the English Government, she learned that there was a vacancy on the throne of Marixburg, and that the logical candidate for the princess-ship was the daughter of Count Waldemar, her scheming brain at once began to work.

"She had been an actress. How easy it would be to increase the resemblance, by artificial means, so that she could carry out her purpose. How easy, in fact, would it be to pass herself off as Waldemar's daughter.

"All she had to do was to separate Col. Kowitzky from his wife, then imprison the one and kill the other. Interference on the part of Count Waldemar need not be feared, for he was insane and under confinement.

"As there were other candidates for the throne of

Marixburg, Mrs. Pembroke knew that she must bring powerful influence to bear in order to win the place for Waldemar's daughter; that is to say, herself.

"In this part of the plot she looked to you, count, for assistance. You were her husband and you had become a member of the Third Section so that you might retrieve the reputation and standing you had lost by some indiscreet actions. I don't know exactly what representations were made, but whatever they were, they were sufficient to cause the czar's government to instruct the Section to assist Count Lanski in his efforts to make Marixburg a dependency of Russia. I can imagine what lies the countess has told you.

"It is not hard for me to guess the way she, through your agency, imposed upon the Third Section as well as the higher authorities. She asserted that Col. Kowitzky was an enemy of the government, she probably manufactured evidence to support the assertion, and she asserted, through you, that the success of the Marixburg scheme, as a Russian affair, depended upon the eternal separation of husband and wife.

"The Third Section was properly impressed, and, to you, count, was delegated the authority to put Col. Kowitzky out of the way. Have I guessed right up to this point?"

The count mumbled something. But Nick could not catch the words. He was painfully agitated and his eyes were oftener on the countess' face than on that of the detective. The countess was acting strangely. She lay upon the divan with her eyes closed, her hands clinched and the muscles of her face twitching. Nick, upon a sudden impulse, removed the gag. The count appeared relieved when the woman opened her eyes. She did not speak, but her expression was fiendish.

The detective resumed his seat and went on: "What the countess did not state was the part she intended to play in the game. The Third Section would never have consented to become a party to the fraud which the countess, with your aid, count, proposed to perpetrate.

"I am satisfied that had the Section become aware of the real object and motive of the conspiracy, Count Lanski and Mrs. Pembroke, alias the Countess Mittinka, would now be either prisoners in Siberia or dead. It was quite proper, from a political, patriotic standpoint, that a Russian subject should occupy the throne of Marixburg.

"It was utterly out of the question that Russian influence should be exerted in favor of England, the power she has every reason to dread. Do you begin to see, count?"

Lanski's face was turned toward the countess. Why didn't she speak? Why didn't she defend herself? There she lay, her features now composed and her gaze riveted upon the countenance of the great American detective.

Nick Carter, with inward satisfaction, proceeded: "The countess has nothing to say. The truth has confounded her. She now knows that her power over you is breaking. She knows that I possess the means of proving everything that I have asserted. Of what use to deny that she is acting in the interest of England, when the fact can be shown through the agency of a few telegrams to St. Petersburg and London? Count, you may as well throw up your hands. You have been tricked. You, a loyal son of Russia, have been used by an English spy, to betray your own country. Come with me and I will further open your eyes. It is not too late to save yourself."

Count Lanski, with lowering brow, arose to his feet and approached the divan. He was breathing heavily and he spoke huskily. "Paula," said he, "tell this man that he lies; do more than that, prove that he lies, or——" He stopped and glared at her, his white teeth bared like a wolf's.

"I have no denial to make," she coldly replied. "Even if all he says be true, I——" She bit her lip and looked at him contemptuously.

"You expected him to support you whatever the object, is that what you would say?" questioned Nick Carter.

"Yes," she answered, wrathfully, "and if he were half a man, he would stand by me against the world."

The count, with a look of loathing, left his position by the divan and faced the detective. "I am convinced," he said, firmly, "that she has deceived me. I am her husband, but"—drawing himself up proudly—"I am a faithful subject of the czar. My country before this scheming enemy. Woman, I cast you off!" The pose was dramatic. An actor would have admired the expression of his face, the vehemence of his speech.

The countess laughed sardonically. "For myself, I say," she hissed, "good riddance to bad rubbish."

The detective cut with his knife the cords which secured Count Lanski's hands. "I can trust you now?" he said, quietly.

"Yes," was the emphatic response. "I am with you. And now, what is your pleasure?"

"You will accompany me to the office of the chief of detectives. There we will plan to straighten out this Marixburg affair and spoiling the game of the countess."

"What are you intentions in reference to her?" asked the count.

"She will remain behind. When we reach the chief's office I will phone the hotel that she needs assistance in your room. She will not remain long in Paris, for the Third Section will have her on its black list."

Two hours after the departure of Nick Carter from the chief's office he reappeared. Berthier and Col. Kowitzky were still there. Count Lanski shook hands with Berthier and bowed stiffly to the colonel. "I was about

to hunt you up, Carter," said the chief. "You have stayed overtime. Something out of the ordinary must have happened."

"Yes." Nick then told his story. Berthier and the colonel listened with the greatest interest. When he had concluded the chief asked: "How did you get on to this Marixburg plot?"

"It was mostly guesswork, but I am a pretty good guesser, as you are aware. I got my cue when the colonel spoke of the resemblance which Mrs. Pembroke bore to his wife. He had also told me of the Waldemar claim to the throne of Marixburg, and combining the two facts with my knowledge of the character of Mrs. Pembroke, I guessed what she was trying to do."

"And you really think that England is backing her?"

"Yes, but without any idea that anything criminal or even dishonorable is contemplated. My opinion is that some official of the English foreign office, who has had close dealings with the woman, has been tricked by some story of hers. Probably she has asserted that she is the daughter of Count Waldemar, though not a friend of Russia. The fact that she has for years been a trusted agent of the foreign office must have been regarded as sufficient proof of her loyalty to England."

"And all the time, I presume, she was professing to the count her loyalty to Russia."

"Yes," replied Lanski, "otherwise I would never have become a party to her scheme."

Then he turned to Col. Kowitzky. "I have done much to injure you and yours," he said, with a look of shame, "for which I am sorry. Believe me when I say that I shall do all in my power to make amends."

The colonel compressed his lips. There was a moment's silence.

Then he said coldly: "I am not yet ready to say 'I forgive you.' When my wife and children are restored to me my feeling may change. Where are they?"

"They are in Vienna."

The colonel was intensely surprised at this statement. Nick Carter looked at the speaker as if he had not heard aright. "In Vienna?" he said, fixing a penetrating look on Count Lanski. "How came they to go there?"

"They went on the representation that they would find the colonel there."

"Whose representation was it?"

"The Countess Mittinka's. She intended to follow and meet them after she had disposed of the colonel."

Nick Carter's eyes were glued to the speaker's face. Under the searching scrutiny the count's eyes fell.

The great detective transferred his gaze to a wolf's head fixed against the wall over the chief's desk. Something in the spectacle caused him to smile. He was about to speak when Berthier's voice was heard.

"What game does the countess expect to play in Vienna?" he asked.

The count, who had been regarding Nick Carter half sullenly, half fearfully, said quickly and easily: "She expects to carry with her proofs that Col. Kowitzky has been false to the woman whose husband he is. These are to be supplemented by news of his having committed suicide."

Nick Carter was now inspecting the count's footwear. His face was expressionless.

Col. Kowitzky, excited over the revelation of his wife's whereabouts, exclaimed: "I must leave Paris for Vienna this afternoon."

"Of course," speaking impatiently. "I care nothing about this Marixburg matter. I went to rejoin my wife."

"I will go with you," said the detective.

"Good. I shall be pleased to have your company."

He spoke with strong gratification. The count looked pleased.

"This, then, shall be the program," said Nick. "With the aid of the chief the authorities at St. Petersburg and London shall be notified of the countess' plot and of the commendable action of Count Lanski. For verification they can call on Berthier. And if there shall be anything further to do in Paris, he can attend to it. As for Count Lanski, I leave him to his own devices. If I have any advice to offer it will be this: Steer clear of Mrs. Pembroke. From to-day she will be marked by the Third Section for condign punishment. Accept whatever comes from the Russian Government. Your story will procure lenient treatment for you."

The count promised to act in accordance with this advice, and quickly left the office.

He was no sooner gone than Nick turned to the chief and spoke rapidly. Berthier's face at first wore an expression of incredulity, but soon showed that he understood.

Passing into another room where several detectives were sitting, he gave certain instructions and then rejoined Nick and the colonel.

"We may and we may not go to Vienna," said Nick to Kowitzky. "Everything depends upon investigations to be made to-day."

The colonel regarded the detective in open-mouthed wonder.

"Why—why, what has happened? Do you not believe the count?"

Nick found a chair and sat down. "Frankly I do not," he said. "The count is one of the slickest scoundrels it was ever my fortune to encounter. I did not mean one word of the language I used before the count left the office. What I said was intended to deceive him. And what I most desire to know at this moment is: Did it deceive him? Did the count leave with the impression that he had fooled me? If he did, then my course becomes plain, but until I know how I stand in his estimation I can make no move as regards Vienna."

"What do you think? Is my wife there?"

"She may be. I can't give an opinion that would be worth anything at this time."

"I thought when you came in with the count that you had converted him to your way of thinking," said the colonel, disappointedly.

"If the count shared your opinion, then I'll be satisfied," Nick replied. "No, I never trusted him. But I will say this: Until I had my interview with him in the hotel I did not know the man. I imagined him a weak vessel, with some dim notions of national honor and patriotism. But I had not heard him speak five minutes before I realized that he was not only cunning, but utterly unscrupulous. He is a magnificent actor. But he overdid the part once or twice. I was watching him closely all the time, and I soon saw that I would have to match cunning with cunning if I expected to score a point. His indignation over my exposure of Mrs. Pembroke's scheme was all sham. There are no secrets between those two. They were prepared for just such an emergency as occurred to-day. By pulling the wool over my eyes, they believed they would be able to go ahead with the Marixburg conspiracy."

"But what can they do after the Third Section has been advised of their treachery?" asked Berthier.

"I can't tell you, because I don't know, and it is too early to hazard a guess. We will undoubtedly spoil their plot as originally arranged, but they have another in reserve, I am sure."

"Will I figure in it?" questioned Col. Kowitzky, nervously.

"Time will tell."

One of the detectives of the department appeared at this juncture. "I have tracked my man," he announced.

"Where is the place?" asked the chief.

"No. — Rue Lasalle."

"The Russian quarter," said Berthier. Then he added: "Did you see the woman?"

"Not at the house, but I passed her a block from it. She was going in that direction."

Nick Carter's eyes glistened. "What do you say now?" he remarked to the colonel.

"I say you are a wizard," was the frank, appreciative answer. "Now, if we could only hear what they are saying to each other."

"Some one may furnish you with a report of the conversation," remarked the chief.

The colonel looked bewildered. Nick Carter explained.

"When the count went out," said he, "I asked the chief to send out two of his best men, one to shadow the count and make quick report, the other to act as eavesdropper to hear what might be said between the count and any third person. The first shadower is the one who just reported. The other detective may be expected shortly."

In half an hour he appeared.

CHAPTER VII.

CHICK MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Claud Perrine, known as the "Ferret," was one of the most efficient sleuths in the Paris detective department. He was small, thin and wiry, with a face that might be called a human interrogation point. His movements were swift and noiseless, and he could get in and out of the smallest hole.

"Well," said the chief, "what luck did you have?"

"I saw and heard everything," was the reply, in a quavering treble.

"Tell your story."

"I saw the count enter a room, and I heard a woman come to the door a few minutes afterward and give three soft taps. The door opened and she went in. Where was I at the time? In the room."

Nick Carter's fine face expressed his admiration. "Perrine," he said, "I salute you."

The little man grinned. He appreciated the compliment which the words conveyed.

"You must understand, my chief and you, Mr. Carter, that I reached the hotel before the appearance of the count. There is a cigar booth next door to the hotel, and the count stopped there a moment. I hurried past him and into the office. To the clerk I said: 'Count Lanski is coming and he wants me to go to his room before him and make sure that a certain person whom he does not wish to see is not there.'"

"How did you know that the count had a room in the hotel?" asked the chief.

"I didn't. I was fishing for points." I hoped he was staying there, and was soon rewarded by the clerk giving me the number of the room, as he seemed to think that I was acting upon authority from the count. I had picked the lock and was inside before the count mounted the stairs.

"Where did I hide? In the wardrobe, of course. There was the chance that I might be discovered, but I was obliged to take it. Luckily, I was not disturbed. Well, the woman came in, and then the fun began. First, they called each other all kinds of fools, then they poured upon the head of a certain Nicholas Carter all the powerful objurgations of three different languages, and wound up the first act by weeping in each other's arms. The scene was an affecting one, and I could scarce restrain my own tears.

"Presently the man and woman became composed and got down to business. 'Did you fool that Nick Carter?' asked the woman. 'To the limit,' was the reply. 'He never tumbled to my play. He and Kowitzky will

make an early start for Vienna.' 'Did you give the address?' The count nodded his head and then the woman said they would walk into a trap.

"Next they talked about the Third Section. The woman said she had wired the chief that her enemies had circulated a lie in relation to her part in the Marixburg affair, and that to prevent further efforts to interfere with the arrangement the Section had endorsed she would withdraw altogether from it, leaving Count Lanski to go on unaided.

"She said further that a messenger would leave Paris to-morrow with a full explanation of the situation here. The count, on his part, asserted that he should send another telegram promising not to show his face in St. Petersburg until he should come accompanied by the daughter of Count Waldemar."

"Is that all you heard?" said the chief.

"Yes, that is all. They stayed in the room but a short time. After they had gone I slipped out and shadowed them to a café."

"Did you hear anything that was said while they were in the café?" asked Nick.

"Only a few words. They did not talk much and I could not secure a good position for listening. I heard the woman say that they must leave for Havre to-morrow morning and sail for Bremen. From thence the pair will take a train for Berlin and Vienna.

"They are going to Vienna to see that the trap is sprung. If they succeed or have reason to believe that they have succeeded then they will try a new game."

"With the Marixburg throne as the prize?" said Berthier.

"Yes," was Nick's reply. "As I said, I can't guess what the new scheme is, but it's up to me to find out. Make your preparations, colonel, for leaving Paris this evening."

"Then you must have come to the conclusion that my wife is in Vienna," said Kowitzky, with a beaming face.

"I am in doubt upon the point," responded Nick. "But the way to find her is by following Count Lanski and the woman. Chief, will you have Perrine ascertain if the count and Mrs. Pembroke buy steamer tickets at Havre to-morrow?"

"Certainly, Carter."

"Thank you. And please notify me regarding whatever move they may take. Phone or wire my London address. You have it on your book."

There followed some further talk, and then Nick and the colonel left the office. The next evening they were in London. On the forenoon of the following day a telegram from Berthier announced that Mrs. Pembroke and the count had sailed from Havre on a French liner bound for Bremen. A day later Nick Carter and Col. Kowitzky were also on the ocean.

Before going on board the steamer the great detective wired Chick, who was in Vienna at the time, stating briefly the points in the case and instructing him to immediately proceed to that city and watch the place where the wife of the colonel was supposed to be located.

On his arrival at Bremen Nick learned that the French liner was in port, having reached it the day before. He also learned something else, something that made him wrinkle his brows. There had been a death at sea. While the liner was one day out, shortly after midnight the Countess Mittinka, crazed with neuralgia, had thrown herself overboard and drowned before assistance could reach her. The details, as given in the paper, caused the detective to smile queerly. The countess had taken passage attended by her maid. She had suffered from the first day of the voyage. On the night of the suicide she was frantic with pain. To prevent her from destroying herself in her stateroom, the maid, who was described as a handsome, young woman of much intelligence, took her on deck, but as soon as they reached it, the countess broke loose from her companion, and, rushing to the rail, went over it into the water. The act was observed by none of the officers or men. The purser, who had come on deck for a smoke before retiring for the night, saw the maid as she came out of the stateroom supporting a limp form, but his back was turned when the countess went over the rail. He heard the maid scream, and ran to the rail in time to see the body sink beneath the waves.

An alarm was sounded, boats were lowered and every possible attempt at rescue was made, but without avail. "The body of the unforunate woman," so the account added, "had found a watery grave."

That evening the detective talked to Patsy and the colonel. "The first move in the new game has been made," he said. "The death of the countess announces to the Third Section that she is out of the race. The chief of that powerful organization is, therefore, to presume that the original program will be carried out. The next play will be made in Vienna. There Lanski has gone, and there also had gone the countess."

"The countess?" exclaimed Col. Kowitzky, looking at Nick in puzzled inquiry. "Why, the countess is dead!"

Nick Carter raised his eyebrows. "Is it possible," said he, "that you have been deceived by that suicide story?"

"But I don't see——" he stammered, when the detective interrupted him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "for the words I used. You are not a detective. You have not spent the best years of your life in hunting down criminals, and in analyzing the workings of the criminal mind. Neither have you a proper conception of the plot which is being directed against yourself and your wife.

"The countess and her confederate, the count, are now more than ever determined to obtain control of the affairs of Marixburg. They are planning to offset the reverse

they met with in Paris. The suicide was deliberately arranged. The maid is a creature of the imagination. I can see how the fraud was worked. The countess secured a stateroom for herself and maid. The count kept out of sight. He had a stateroom of his own. In one of the countess' trunks was a lay figure, a milliner's dummy. On the night of the suicide play the countess was the maid and the dummy—the limp figure which the purser observed—was the countess. Do you see?"

The colonel, who was beginning to understand, inclined his head.

"The countess, acting as the maid, had weighted the dummy, and when the purser's back was turned, had dragged it to the rail and then threw it overboard. Now she will act *sub rosa*. The Third Section will deal with the count, but she will guide the actions of that slippery individual. They have probably taken train for Vienna. But I must make sure of that. Patsy, it will be your business to get me a list of the first-class passengers for yesterday's and to-day's trains. If they have departed, we must follow them at once."

It did not take long to obtain the information Nick required. Patsy was gone an hour, and returned with a long list of names. Nick went over it carefully, and then said: "I think the countess and the count are down here as 'Mr. and Mrs. Pemberton, London.' The agent at the station is a sharp fellow, and he may remember and be able to describe the person who secured sleeping-car accommodations. I'll try him."

The detective took up the telephone receiver and was soon talking with the agent. "Hello! Do you remember who it was that secured Section 8 on the *Virginius*, yesterday afternoon, destination, Vienna?"

"Section 8, eh? Let me think. Yes, I do, because I had some trouble in making him understand. He gave an English name, but he was a foreigner. Could hardly make himself understood."

"Can you describe him?"

"He was an oldish chap, had a grizzled mustache and a military bearing."

"Might he not have been a Russian?"

"Sure. I think he was."

After thanking the clerk for the information, Nick hung up the receiver and turned to the colonel. "It was the count, all right. He will reach Vienna a little in advance of us. That will give Chick time to do some preliminary work." Nick looked at the floor a moment, then raised his eyes and said: "There is something about this that I don't quite grasp. The departure of the count and countess for Vienna means something more than a move to put me and the colonel out of the way. I must figure this out while I am on the train."

All arrangements being made, the next morning Nick and the colonel were passengers on the express for Vienna, where they arrived in a few hours.

Chick had been notified of their coming, and met them at the depot. The expression of his face told Nick that he was charged to the brim with information, but no questions were asked and nothing was volunteered until all three were in quarters, which had been engaged for the detective and his companion.

"Now," said Nick to his assistant, "you may relieve yourself of your load."

"I have discovered a woman, but she is not the wife of Col. Kowitzky."

The colonel's face fell. A weight seemed to have settled on his heart. Nick's countenance was impassive. He knew Chick of old, and was aware that Chick had a way of marshaling his facts that would have delighted the soul of an orator.

"She is not the colonel's wife," the young detective went on, "because she is a much older woman. Yesterday she left the house where she is staying and went to a back street in a mean part of the city. I followed her, and when she had concluded her business, which occupied an hour of her time, I prospected the building and discovered that a beautiful, young woman lives there."

The colonel's eyes brightened. "Did you see her?" he asked, eagerly.

Chick regarded him in pained surprise. "Did I see her? I should remark that I did. She is a foreigner. She has two children, and is waiting for news of her husband. Her husband's name is——"

"Col. Kowitzky?" said Nick Carter.

"Not on your life!" returned Chick. "His name is Boris Felsmoi."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHICK BAITS THE TRAP.

Nick Carter heard Chick's statement with amazement. "Her husband's name is Boris Felsmoi?" he said. "Why, that is the name under which Count Lanski is enrolled in the Third Section. Did you talk with the woman, Chick?"

"Yes, for over half an hour."

"Before you tell us what she said, describe her."

The description fitted the wife of Col. Kowitzky.

"I must go there at once," said the colonel, an eager

light in his eyes. "I knew it was my wife when you mentioned the children."

He was on his feet, hat in hand, when Nick interposed.

"Wait," he said. "Chick has not finished his story. We must make no rash move. Remember that it is easy for the countess to make up as your wife. Go on, Chick."

The colonel, with a sigh, resumed his seat. Chick proceeded: "In the belief that she was the colonel's wife, I introduced myself as a friend of her husband. She seemed startled when I made the announcement, but soon recovered herself and talked freely. According to her story she came to Vienna on the strength of a letter from a dear friend, the Countess Mittinka, who wrote that Col. Kowitzky was in this city and wanted her to join him here. Owing to circumstances which he would explain when they met it was necessary that she should pass as the wife of Boris Felsmoi. She was also to instruct the children, a boy of eight and a girl of ten, to answer to the name of Felsmoi, and never to reveal the fact that their father's real name is Kowitzky."

"Did either of the children come into the room while you were conversing with the mother?" asked Nick.

"The girl came in, and the mother, with a sharp word, sent her out again. The girl had a frightened look, and there were red circles about her eyes. While we talked I observed the woman closely, and before the interview ended I came to the conclusion that I had put my foot in it."

Nick's countenance exhibited enlightenment. The colonel was frowning.

"I knew after a while, as well as I know that I am here in this room, that the woman was a fraud; that she was not the wife of Col. Kowitzky, but the Countess Mittinka."

"Then where is my wife?" the colonel burst forth, his face expressing the keenest anxiety. "She must be somewhere in this city, else the children would not be here."

"She is not far away," said Nick, soothingly, "and we will find her, never fear. And now to seriously consider the situation. Chick's visit to that house has upset all my plans. Unfortunately, I could not by means of the telegram, state fully every point in the case. I made no mention of the resemblance which the countess bears to Col. Kowitzky's wife. If I had done so Chick would not have made the mistake of giving himself away. But there is no use in crying over spilt milk. Instead of losing by the mistake, we must try to profit by it. The countess now is aware that I am on to the new trap she has laid.

"She will prepare another and the three of us must manage it so that she will think we have fallen into it. By deceiving her in that respect, we will stand a good chance of finding the colonel's wife. On this point I will speak later. The skein is tangled. It needs unraveling. Why is the countess personating the colonel's wife in Vienna?"

"To deceive the Russian consul, perhaps," suggested Chick.

"You are right, my boy. I see it all now. She has caused the colonel's wife to believe that the colonel's danger is so pressing that her only chance of meeting him lies in her acceptance of her friend, the countess', plan. What is that plan? Just this: She must go into seclusion and allow the countess to pass as the wife and mother, the argument being advanced that in the event of further persecution the countess could reveal her identity and save herself. In other words, if the countess, as the wife of the proscribed colonel, should find herself in a difficult or dangerous situation, she could remove herself from it by declaring that she is not the colonel's wife, but an employee of a representative of the Third Section. The plan would be accepted because the colonel's wife does not know who her husband's enemies are, or who are her own enemies. Could she but know that the only enemies either she or the colonel have to fear are the count and countess, how different would be her actions?

"As for the countess' personation of the colonel's wife, there is but one explanation. She intends, if her Vienna scheme turns out well, to turn up as the daughter of Count Waldemar, and as such to win the Marixburg throne. The children will be terrorized into keeping up the deception that the countess is the mother, but at the first favorable opportunity they will be placed in a convent or otherwise disposed of."

"If her Vienna plan succeeds," said the colonel, with pale face, "it means death for my wife."

Nick Carter did not reply. His expression was grave.

"Something must be done immediately," the colonel went on. "My loved ones are in danger. We must find

them. Come, Mr. Carter, summon all your wits and say what shall be the first move."

"Two moves must be made to-day," said the great detective. "You are booked to make one, colonel. You must call at the house and inquire for Mrs. Felsmoi."

"But she is not my wife. Why should I call there?"

"To pave the way to a meeting with your wife. If you do not go, the countess will conclude that Chick saw through her disguise and knew her for what she is. If you go, she will think, I hope, that Chick was deceived and that we were all deceived."

"But what shall I say, what shall I do, when I meet the impostor? I can't accept her as my wife. She can't hope to deceive me."

"You will not meet her." Nick spoke with quiet assurance. "Go there, and you will make a discovery. There is no danger. The danger lies somewhere else."

The colonel had no further objection to make. After he had gone, Nick turned to Chick. "You are down for a hard rôle. I want you to go to the house and play the English woman."

Chick's eyes twinkled. "How can it be managed?" he asked.

"I'll tell you after you have answered a few questions. First, has the woman any regular times for going out of doors?"

"Yes. She goes out in the morning for fruit, vegetables and groceries, and in the afternoon for fish or meat."

"At what time in the afternoon?"

"Five o'clock."

"It is now nearly four. You will have plenty of time to prepare. When she goes out you will drive up in a cab and deliver a message from Mrs. Pembroke. I am making this arrangement on the supposition that the woman was once in Mrs. Pembroke's employ in London. You will tell her that Mrs. Pembroke is anxious to see her immediately, that it is a matter of life and death. When the woman is in the cab you will drive to my quarters. I will be waiting for her, and the rest will be easy."

After a few other words had been exchanged, Chick departed.

Nick waited for the return of Col. Kowitzky.

Before an hour had elapsed the colonel entered the room. "You were right, Mr. Carter," he said, with a gloomy face, "the woman was not there."

"She left a note for you, didn't she?"

The colonel showed surprise. "How did you guess it?"

"By putting myself in her place. Your coming to the house was proof to her mind that you believed you would find your wife there. If you had not found her and had obtained no explanation of her sudden departure, your suspicions would have been aroused. So a note was left for you."

"But the note is in my wife's handwriting."

"Of course it is, and your wife wrote it. And right here is where the countess made a mistake. The note is proof positive that your wife is in Vienna. We were almost sure of this before. Now the fact is established beyond the shadow of a doubt. And, better still, she has been told that you are here. How did she come to write the note? At the suggestion of the countess, of course. After Chick's call she hastened to the place where your wife is concealed, told a plausible story and had the note written. And now what does she say?"

The colonel without a word handed the paper to the detective. Nick read it with a smile. It ran as follows:

"My Dear Husband: I had hoped to meet you very soon, but in some way our enemies discovered my retreat, and my immediate departure for a safer place became necessary. The information came from the Countess Mittinkh. I have trusted her and trust her still, but now that you are here I shall act in some things for myself. She does not know that I have written this. If she knew she might not approve of it. I am dying to see you, and I must run the risk of offending her. I am going to what is known as the old Kreutzer Castle. Anyone in the neighborhood will tell you where it is. Come to me as soon as you can. Oh, how I long to see you, my love, my husband! We have been parted so long. Come, and come quickly."

"Very ingeniously prepared is this new scheme of the countess," was Nick's comment. "If she can't trick us at the old hiding place, she figures on doing so at the house at Kreutzer Castle. We must move without loss of time, and yet, I don't like to open the campaign until I have heard from Chick. It is evident that the countess expects that you will lose no time in going out to the castle. If you delay, she will think that you have seen through her game."

There was a knock at the door. Nick opened it. A policeman stood in the corridor with a note in his hand. "Are you Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"I am."

"Then here is a note which your assistant, Chick, requested me to deliver into your hands."

"Where did you meet him?" questioned Nick.

"On the Hohenstrasse. He was in a cab."

"Disguised?"

"Yes, as an old woman."

Nick took the note, and when the officer had gone read it quickly. The contents made his eyes sparkle. "Colonel," said he, "Chick has done the trick. We may start for the castle immediately."

"What does he say?" asked the colonel, in marked excitement.

"This: 'I have made the riffle, and in a way neither of us figured on. The old woman will not be driven to your quarters. The game has been made without that detail. I met her on the street going to a butcher's and reeled off the fairy tale you concocted. She took it all in and never batted an eye. But she refused to get into the cab until after she had put on her best duds. So I was forced to go back with her to the house.

"She went in and I followed. I had determined on the spur of the moment to change your program. I hope you will pardon me, but it occurred to me that if I could shorten the time the chances of circumventing the count and countess would be improved. There might be danger in taking the woman to your quarters.

"Valuable time would be lost and the countess might come to the old nest house while the woman was away. As I entered the door she turned to close it, and seeing me, at once became suspicious.

"I hadn't a good explanation ready, and I didn't need one, for now was the time to act. I sprang upon her, and though she fought like a tiger cat, I succeeded in reducing her to submission. She was alone in the house. That was lucky. There is a basement and I carried her down there. After securing her against escape, I went upstairs, and, rummaging among her things, found some glad rags and put them on.

"Then I returned to the basement, and by the aid of paints and powders, with the old woman in front of me as a model, soon made myself to look so much like her that it would have taken an expert to tell us apart. When I had become satisfied with my appearance, I grabbed a veil and went out of doors.

"My cab was gone. I had neglected to secure the horse and it had wandered away. I was disturbed at first over this mishap, but before many minutes had passed I had reason to congratulate myself on the absence of the cab. Another cab came up and stopped in front of the house.

"The driver got down from his perch, and, after asking if I were Mrs. Carnes, handed me a note and waited for me to read it. The countess was the writer and the note ordered Mrs. Carnes to come immediately by the cab to the old Kreutzer Castle.

"After I had read the note, I gave the cabman a second look. I had seen him before. Where? Ah, yes. He was Bill Seeton, the fellow who played such an ignoble part in the Dormant affair in San Francisco, California, and who received such a raking down from you, Nick. He had left America sometime after that matter was closed and come to Vienna. There is no man in the world Bill Seeton fears more than Nick Carter. I acted now upon the assumption that Bill would never dare to oppose your will in anything. I asked him if he had done any other work for the countess.

"He swore that he had never met her before this day. I know when a man of his class is speaking the truth, and his manner convinced me that he was not lying. Then I up and told him that Nick Carter was in the city, and that I was working for him.

"You ought to have seen the expression of the fellow's face. If I had told him the devil was at his heels he could not have been more scared. He shook as if with the ague and his teeth were castanets.

"'For ther Lord's sake,' he blubbered, 'if I'm in a mess, pull me out of it. I wouldn't go agin' Nick Carter for a million cartwheels.'*

"I believed him. 'You do as I say, Bill,' was my suggestion, 'and you will come out all right.' He promised to be guided by me, and the first thing I asked him to do was to drive down to the stationer's shop and get some letter paper, for I could find none in the house. He promptly executed this commission, and then I proceeded to write this note. I shall hand it to the first policeman I see. That's all. I'm off for the castle. Govern yourself accordingly."

*See "Nick Carter's Convict Enemy," No. 432.

"Your assistant is a very able man," said the colonel, when Nick had finished. The great detective smiled approval. "There are no insects on Chick, colonel. Now, to business."

The chief of police was communicated with and the situation explained to him. After briefly explaining the Kowitzky case, Nick asked the chief to send the patrol wagon to remove Mrs. Carnes. "Prevent her from speaking with anyone until you hear from me," concluded Nick.

"That matter off my mind," said the detective, "we will now prepare for a trip to the old castle."

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE TRAP WORKED.

The old Kreutzer Castle lay at the foot of a hill, and the rear end rested on piles sunk in the waters of the river. It stood some distance from the street, and the nearest building was half a block away. It was an ancient baronial castle, which had long withstood the ravages of time, but now was fast falling into decay. Generation after generation had lived and died in it from the time that men never felt safe in leaving their abode unless protected by a complete suit of mail and a good Toledo blade in their right hand.

When the sun was setting, a cab stopped in front of the rambling old castle. Col. Kowitzky alighted and, walking quickly up the front steps, lifted the huge brass knocker on the heavy oak door. Some forgotten owner of a hundred years ago had added the convenience of a knocker to apprise the inmates of anyone's approach, but it seemed never to have occurred to the occupants of a later day to hang a bell rope, to say nothing of installing an electric bell.

The door was opened by Chick in the guise of the old woman.

"Where is Nick?" he asked.

"Mr. Carter is the cabman."

"Good. Come in."

They passed along a narrow hall and entered the living room. The floor was bare, and several rickety chairs constituted the furniture. "Sit down," said Chick, "and I will give you the layout."

The colonel took out his handkerchief, brushed the dust from the seat of a chair, looked at it distrustfully, and then sat down in it carefully.

"I am alone in the house," began Chick, "but the countess will be here in half an hour. She did not get on to me, but she's mortally afraid of Nick. I was instructed to tell you that your wife had gone out for a walk and would return shortly."

"Have you been over the house?"

"Yes. The kitchen is the place to beware of. There is a trapdoor, and under it the water; and there is a monkey business against the ceiling which was put there to be dropped on the heads of the persons selected as the countess' victims. Knocked down, they would be dispatched with iron bars—they are there—and then dumped into murky waters below. But nothing must be done until the countess returns."

"My wife? Where is she? Have you learned?"

"No. When the countess comes we must make her tell us."

"Mr. Carter should know what you know."

"Correct, but I dare not go out and tell him. At this moment the house is being watched. The countess is looking for the appearance of Nick."

"But he may make a false move if he is not posted," urged the colonel.

"Not he," returned Chick, confidently. "My failure to come out is a warning to look out for squalls. Don't worry about Nick. You may depend on his doing the right thing at the right time."

The colonel remembered something, and was about to speak of it when the front door opened. A moment later Count Lanski and the Countess Mitinka entered the living room. Bowing slightly to Col. Kowitzky, the woman said sharply to Chick: "Take the colonel into the library. His wife is coming, and I don't care to be a witness of their meeting."

If the colonel had gone without a word, the countess would have suspected that his eyes had been opened to the truth. But he had been instructed by Nick Carter, and therefore rose to the occasion. Without moving from his chair, he said with all the sternness he could muster: "I decline to place myself in your power, madame. Your presence here is proof that I have been deceived. My wife is not coming. I shall leave this house."

The countess' violet eyes sparkled with delight. "I don't wonder at your attitude, colonel," she said, quietly. "But, believe me, when I say that the day of persecution

is over. I am no longer your foe. Read that and you will understand." She handed him a paper with an official seal, and bearing the stamp of the Russian Third Section. What he read was this:

"COUNT LANSKI: Return at once to St. Petersburg. The Marixburg affair is settled. The daughter of Count Waldemar is out of the race. France and Russia have combined on the Princess Markovitch.

"BOVINSKI."

"Are you satisfied?" the countess said as the colonel looked up.

"Entirely so," was the frank reply. "Now I am willing to follow your instructions." With a profound bow, the colonel allowed Chick to conduct him to the library.

"Now for Nick Carter," said the countess in a low voice, when she found herself alone with the count. "He is the cabman, and his anxiety to ascertain the cause of his friend's prolonged absence will bring him to the door presently."

And what was the great detective doing all this time?

He was on the cab when the two conspirators approached the house. The countess glanced at him sharply. Nick returned the glance with a smile. The countess had reason to remember that smile. Her countenance was dark as she looked away.

As soon as the door had closed upon her form, Nick descended to the ground, and, opening the door of the cab, entered. He was out of sight a moment, and then came out again. Crouching low, he ran around the side of the house. Shortly afterward, another person, who bore a remarkable resemblance to the disguised detective, got out of the cab and mounted to the driver's seat. He remained there about five minutes, and then alighting to the ground, started for the front door of the house. The bell brought the countess to the door.

"I left a fare here," said the cabman in a wheezy voice. "He said he would not be gone more than ten minutes. Will you please call him and ask what his instructions now are?"

"He is very busily engaged," replied the countess, sweetly. "Won't you step into the kitchen and have some refreshment while you are waiting?"

"Don't care if I do, ma'am," said the cabman, with alacrity.

He followed the countess to the library door. "Go in there," she said. "You will find everything you desire."

As he entered she closed the door, and then listened with all her ears. A moment passed, and then something of great weight struck the floor.

A cry of agony followed; then heavy blows drowned all other sounds.

The countess, with pale face and beating heart, returned to the living room. In a tone of intense relief she said to the count: "It is all over. Both of them have been disposed of. Mrs. Carnes is a jewel. I know her of old. She has done work for me before and has never made a botch. She is worth a dozen ordinary men."

At this moment Chick entered the room. His hair was disheveled, there was blood on his hands and his lips were twitching. Sinking into a chair, he covered his face with his apron and sobbed convulsively.

The count and countess regarded the false servant stolidly. Presently Chick looked up. "I want to go away from here," he said, shudderingly, in the voice of Mrs. Carnes. "If you have any more work of this kind, Mrs. Pembroke, you will have to get some one else to do it."

"This is the last, Mary," replied the countess, in a conciliatory tone. "As for going away from Vienna, you shall go to-morrow, if you desire."

"Very well. And now I'll go back to our other quarters and pack up. Shall I see you this evening?"

"No, we are going to a masked ball. I will call at the house to-morrow morning and settle with you."

Chick was dying to ask a question relating to the whereabouts of Col. Kowitzky's wife, but did not dare to.

"Will you go with the count?" he asked, for want of something better to say.

The answer almost made him jump. "No," she said, "he is going with somebody else. You know who"—with a meaning look.

Chick nodded his head. The countess thought he understood. He did understand.

The cab took the trio away from the house. The count was compelled, much against his desire, to act as driver.

On reaching the heart of the city, they left the vehicle without taking the trouble to tie up the horse. Chick parted with the deceived conspirators, and, after proceeding several blocks, turned into a cross street and found his way to Nick's quarters. No one was there. It was after dark, but there was a bright moonlight. Chick waited a while, and then, leaving a note for his chief, hastened to the nearest restaurant. His gratification may

be imagined when he saw Nick and the colonel seated at one of the tables.

The great detective's face shone with pleasure when his eyes fell on his assistant.

"Was so hungry that I couldn't stand it any longer," said Nick. "Sit down and we will discuss the viands and something besides. Everything all right?"

"The end is in sight, Nick."

The colonel, who had been nervously playing with a fork, asked quickly: "Then we'll find my wife, won't we?"

"I'm hoping it will be our luck to find her to-night," answered Chick.

Then he told his story. Nick's face was beaming when Chick concluded. "Your wife, colonel, will attend that ball. I know what ball the countess had reference to. It is to be given under the auspices of the Russian Benevolent Society—that's the English for it. I will send for tickets at once."

The colonel looked puzzled. "Why should my wife attend a ball when she knows I am in Vienna looking for her?"

"Why?" repeated Nick. "To meet you, of course. It's only another move of the conspirators. They are planning to go away to-morrow, and they desire to keep up her spirits to the last. She probably wondered why she did not meet you to-day, and now they have told her that for good and sufficient reasons you do not dare to appear in daylight; but will run no risk in coming to the ball masked."

"What is their plan in regard to her?" asked Chick. "Do they mean to kill her?"

"I believe they do. With the new scheme, her living presence anywhere on earth is a menace. The countess, posing as the colonel's wife, has planned to leave for Russia to-morrow. She intends to take with her the colonel's children. For the children's sake, the mother has been allowed to live up to this time. They have probably been permitted to see her every day. But the going away under conditions which I have heretofore detailed, renders it necessary that the mother be given her quietus. My opinion is, that the countess intends to manage that affair. Unless we interfere, the colonel's wife will be taken to the ball, and from the ball to some spot selected for her death."

"My God!" exclaimed Col. Kowitzky, "I can't bear to hear you talk in this strain. Let us get to the ball as soon as possible. I can't eat when I think of my darling's dangerous situation."

Nick, whose sympathies were with the sorely distressed husband, hurriedly dispatched his meal and stepped to the restaurant telephone.

"It's all right," he said, when he returned to his companions. "The chief has promised to procure the invitations—will be sent to my rooms in half an hour. Let's go there and wait."

CHAPTER X.

THE CONSPIRACY DISSOLVES.

The masked ball was well under way when three maskers passed the doorkeeper. One represented Mehistopheles, another a disreputable looking hobo, and the third, Hamlet. Upon the floor they separated, Hamlet and the hobo moving about among the crowd; Mephisto hastening to a picturesquely arranged booth in a corner, guarded by two tall Muscovites. A word in the ear of one of the guards, and the curtains concealing the entrance were drawn aside, allowing Mephisto to enter. There were several costumes lying upon a couch, but neither of the two persons occupying the booth were in masked ball attire. They were seated at a small table, and busily engaged in conversation when the visitor appeared. One, a distinguished looking man of middle age, with coal-black mustaches and beard, was the Russian consul. The other, a younger man, with a smooth, intelligent face, was his secretary.

Advancing to the table, Mephisto handed the consul a note. After reading it, the consul, with a smile of welcome, extended his hand. "I am exceedingly pleased to meet you, Mr. Carter," he said in English. "I have already been advised regarding the Marixburg affair. The Third Section views with suspicion the report of the drowning of the Countess Mittinka, and, upon information obtained from Chief Berthier of Paris, has instructed me to keep a sharp lookout in this city. What you did before your arrival in this city has been reported to me, and I am now ready to give you any assistance within my power."

"Before I tell you what I know, your excellency, I wish you would inform me if you have discovered anything."

"I have met the daughter of Count Waldemar and her two children. They were presented to me day before yesterday by Count Lanski."

"How did the children act?"

"They were very bashful. They kept their heads down and did not open their mouths."

"Have you ever met the Countess Mittinka?"

"Once, and that was many years ago."

"Did you remark any resemblance in the daughter of Count Waldemar to the countess."

"Now that you speak of the matter, it appears to me that there was a resemblance. It did not occur to me at the time."

"It was the countess, and not Waldemar's daughter, who was presented to you," said the detective, with steady assurance. "Listen and you will understand."

Nick's story amazed and impressed the consul. He drummed upon the table with his fingers. "And they are all here to-night, you say?"

"I have reason to believe so, your excellency."

"Then the arrest must be made here. As the countess has not only tried to hoodwink the Third Section by having a false report of her death published, but has also committed a grave fraud by appearing before me, the Russian representative, as the woman who has been selected by Russia for the throne of Marixburg, she has forfeited all right to liberty. The count, as her accomplice, is in the same boat, as you Americans would say. He, too, must be arrested."

Nick Carter shook his head. "There might be dangerous complications if you ordered their arrest," he said.

"So there might," admitted the consul, after a moment's thought. "This is the Austrian-Hungarian empire, not Russia. I might not be able to hold them long enough to dispose of international red-tape business. Have you anything to propose?"

"Yes. They may be arrested for a crime committed against the laws of the land. This afternoon they attempted to murder two men at the old Kreutzer Castle. Arrested for that crime, they can be held until Austria-Hungary and Russia come to an understanding regarding their offense against the laws of Russia."

The consul at once fell in with the plan. "We must have a complaint made and the warrants issued at once," he said.

"The warrants are in my pocket," returned Nick, quietly.

"Good. You are a very shrewd man, Mr. Carter. I see that you will be able to manage the affair without any help from me."

"All that I desire is that you shall instruct your detectives that I must not be interfered with."

"I will do so without delay."

Nick was about to depart, when something that he had forgotten to speak about occurred to him.

"Your excellency," he said, "I have omitted to ask you one question. I believe I can guess what your answer will be. I would like to hear your answer as a confirmation of my belief. Does the Third Section, or any of the other high officials of St. Petersburg, know that Count Lanski is the husband of Mrs. Pembroke, alias the Countess Mittinka?"

"No. If the Third Section had known of this relationship when the count asked to be assigned to the Marixburg case, he would have been sent to Siberia, and the countess would have been deported with the warning that she must never again show her face in the czar's dominions under the penalty of death. The marriage evidently was a secret one, and will aggravate the case against him."

After leaving the consul's booth, Nick Carter sought and found the hobo. In a corner where they could not be overheard, the detective asked, quickly: "Well, Chick, what have you learned?"

"This: The count is here. He came with a woman. We have reason to suppose that she is the colonel's wife. I have not located the countess. I have been watching the count, and he is still with the woman he came in with."

"Has he spoken to anyone?"

"No. For the last half hour he has been sitting on a wall seat talking with his companion."

"Did you hear any of the words that passed between them?"

"I did not. They have not raised their voices above a whisper."

While Nick and Chick were talking, the colonel, as Hamlet, joined them. He was very nervous. "How long must we wait?" he asked. "Why not strike now?"

"We can't make a decisive move until we have located the countess," said Nick. "Have patience. Your period of suspense will soon be over. Ah, there is the chief of police. I have business with him. Wait here until I return."

The chief, in a red domino and white sash, was standing a few yards away looking at the dancers.

Nick came up and touched him on the arm. They

talked earnestly for several minutes. Then the detective hurried back to Chick and the colonel. His voice was shaky as he spoke.

"Something has happened," he said. "There has been a new deal. But it's all right for our side. Before I came here, as you know, I was in the chief's office for half an hour. I learned something there of great importance, and left orders for certain work to be attended to. That work has been done, and the result is something of a surprise."

"Explain," said the colonel, as he laid a trembling hand on Nick's arm. "Not now," was the hurried answer, "for I am going to act."

He pointed toward two of the dancers, said a few words to Chick, and then started forward. As he did so the music stopped. Some of the masked figures took seats; others moved toward the dressing rooms. The two who had attracted the attention of Nick Carter made their way in the direction of the ladies' dressing room. Nick followed closely behind. At his heels came Chick and the colonel.

At the door of the dressing room the two maskers stopped. One was costumed to represent the Sultan of Morocco; the other, a woman, impersonated Cleopatra. The man was whispering some words into the woman's ear, when Nick Carter, as Mephisto, came up and stood so close to the man arrayed as the Sultan that he almost touched him.

The "Sultan" quickly raised his head; anger flashed from his eyes as he fastened them on Mephisto.

"You are impertinent," he said, in French. "If you were outside I would be pleased to express my opinion of your conduct at more length and with greater force."

Nick did not reply, but, making a quick movement, tore the mask from the woman's face. The features of the Countess Mittinka were revealed.

Then ensued a scene of the wildest confusion. Count Lanski's dagger flashed in the air. Before he could use it, Chick's right arm shot forward, and the count went to the floor as though he had been struck by a sledge hammer. The greatest excitement prevailed. A crowd of male and female maskers surrounded the participants of the mêlée, and the great detective might have had some trouble in carrying out his plans but for the opportune arrival of the chief of police and the Russian consul. When order had been restored, the count and countess, each handcuffed—for Nick had no mercy for the woman who had plotted so many murders—were taken to a carriage outside and driven to the city prison.

In the chief's office, after the prisoners had been locked up, Nick answered the look of anxious inquiry in Col. Kowitzy's eyes by saying: "Your wife is safe. You shall see her within half an hour. She will meet you here."

"Where is she, and why was she not at the ball?"

"She did not go to the ball because she refused to accompany Count Lanski."

"Then she must have discovered that he is a villain."

"At the time she refused, she did not have any evidence to guide her, but she had begun to fear him. When he first urged her to go to the ball, representing that she would meet you there, she interposed some faint objections. There had been so many promises that were not fulfilled, a doubt of the count's honesty crept into her mind. Her cold, suspicious attitude angered the count. His threatening looks increased her suspicions. In the end, she flatly declined to go to the ball in his company."

"How did you learn all this?" asked the colonel, in great astonishment.

"I will tell the whole story," replied Nick. "On our way to the ball to-night, I left you and Chick to come here and transact a little business with the chief of police. The real Mrs. Carnes was brought from her cell and made to talk. At first she refused to say a word that would compromise the countess, her employer, but when she had been thoroughly informed as to the situation, and made to realize that the countess' hours of freedom were short, she confessed everything.

"She told us where the colonel's wife and children might be found. We did not expect to find the wife, for we believed she had gone to the ball, but we wanted the children, and an officer was immediately dispatched to the place where they were staying with instructions to bring them to the chief's office. I could not wait for the return of the officer, but left with the understanding that the chief would come to the dancing hall and inform me as to the result of the officer's mission."

"From what you said after you met the chief in the ballroom, I infer that his report was not what you were expecting," said Chick.

"It was not, for he told me that the colonel's wife was not present. The officer sent for the children had found them and the mother. The part of her story relating to her refusal to attend the ball you have heard. What

occurred after the count started for the dance I will now tell you. Her suspicions in reference to the good intentions of the count grew stronger after he had gone. She began to suspect the countess. She was alone. Her children had been taken from her upon the representation that a separation for a short time was necessary for the safe carrying out of the plan to bring her husband to her. The more she considered the words and actions of the countess and the count, the more convinced she became that she was being made the victim of some criminal plot. At last, in her nervousness and fear, she resolved to go back to the house where she had stayed before. The countess had assured her that the children were there and having the best of care. She reached the house about eight o'clock. The caretaker, a creature of the countess, met her at the door, and took her for the countess. 'The children!' were the poor woman's first words. 'Where are they?' The caretaker regarded her with amazement, but not yet suspicious of anything wrong, said: 'They are where you placed them, are they not?'

"The moment these words were uttered the colonel's wife grasped the truth. Controlling her agitation, she replied, with a laugh: 'So they are. Do you know I have been so worried to-day that I forgot where I had put them. But I must see them at once. I want to make sure that the detectives have not found them.'

"In a very short space of time she was in the company of her dear ones. Not long after her meeting with them, the officer sent by the chief of police arrived."

Col. Kowitzky had listened to this story in breathless silence. When Nick ceased speaking, he drew a deep breath. He tried to speak, but could not for the fullness in his throat.

"'All's well that ends well,' colonel," said Nick Carter, cheerfully.

"God bless you! I shall never forget you—never," replied the colonel.

A carriage stopped outside. A beautiful woman and two pretty children were assisted to the walk. They were on their way to the chief's office, when Col. Kowitzky rushed out of the door and met them.

* * * * * * *

There was a happy gathering in Livonnet's restaurant about midnight. Nick Carter, Chick, the chief of police, Col. Kowitzky, with his wife and children, and the Russian consul, formed a party of bright faces and happy hearts. The consul had responded gladly to a telephone invitation, and the words he addressed to the colonel and his wife filled to the brim their cup of joy.

"I had just answered our friend, Nick Carter's, invitation to come here," he said, "when there came another call. The Countess Mittinka desired to see me immediately. It was from the police station. I went there, and was at once admitted to the countess' cell. She had collapsed utterly, and was willing to confess everything, hoping that my influence would be used to save her from a shameful death.

"The wretched woman told me many things which we all know. But she revealed one thing which should interest the colonel. She manufactured the evidence which caused the Third Section to look upon him as a traitor to his native land, resulting in the confiscation of his estates and the many attempts to imprison him. This confession will be written out, signed and sworn to to-morrow, and I shall forward it to St. Petersburg with my report of the unmasking of the conspiracy to steal the throne of Marixburg. If you care to remain in Vienna sixty days longer, colonel, I think I can assure you that you may then depart for Russia with a feeling that your troubles are over."

The colonel elected to remain in the city. Before the expiration of sixty days he was on his way to the land of the czar. He was welcomed in St. Petersburg with a public reception and a private audience with the czar.

There had been a postponement of the election of a ruler in Marixburg. A week after the arrival of the daughter of Count Waldemar in Russia she was made the unanimous choice for the throne, and to-day reigns with her handsome, contented consort, formerly Col. Kowitzky.

Count Lanski and Mrs. Pembroke, alias the Countess Mittinka, were taken to Russia, and there tried for conspiracy. The count was sentenced to be shot, and the countess sent a life prisoner, to Siberia.

One of Nick Carter's most valued possessions is a bit of parchment upon which the Autocrat of all the Russias, over his own signature, attests his admiration for and his gratitude to the great American detective for the skillful and efficient work in the Marixburg affair.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 463, will contain "The Millionaire Cracksman; or, Nick Carter's Mascot Case."

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